Tanganyika
Tides

Tanganyika Tides

(Novel)

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Lake Tanganyika lies within the African Great Lakes region, stretching across parts of Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is the longest freshwater lake in the world, approximately 673 kilometers long, with an average width of 50 kilometers; and the second deepest after Lake Baikal, reaching depths of around 1,470 meters. Covering an area of about 32,900 square kilometers, it holds nearly 18% of the world's available fresh surface water.

Section I:

The Capture

Chapter 01:

The Last Dawn at Mwanga

The first light of dawn crept over Lake Tanganyika like a slow exhale, its vast waters stretching beyond sight, dark blue fading into mist where sky met horizon. Neema, twenty-three, stepped barefoot onto the cool sand behind her hut, the hem of her faded yellow dress brushing against dew-wet grass. The air smelled of woodsmoke and wet earth, the lingering scent of last night's rain still clinging to the thatched roofs of Mwanga, somewhere between Isonga and Kalugunga.

She moved quietly, not wanting to wake the children. Inside, her husband Juma, twenty-five, still slept beside their five-year-old son, Mbwana, whose small fingers curled loosely around the edge of the thin blanket. Their daughter, Aisha, three, lay sprawled on her stomach, one arm flung out as if she had been reaching for something in her dreams. Neema paused, watching the steady rise and fall of their chests, then slipped outside.

The village was just beginning to stir. A few fishermen were already dragging their wooden canoes onto the shore, their low voices carrying across the water as they checked their nets. Old Mzee Baraka sat outside his hut, sharpening his machete with slow, deliberate strokes, the sound a steady rasp against the morning

quiet. Near the communal firepit, two women ground millet, the rhythmic scrape of stone against stone blending with the distant cry of a fish eagle.

Neema walked toward the small pen where their three sheep huddled together, their wool matted from the night's dampness. They bleated softly as she approached, pressing against the rough wooden slats. She unlatched the gate and let them out, guiding them toward the patch of grass near the water's edge where they grazed each morning. Kneeling beside the smallest ewe, she ran her hands along its sides, checking for ticks before settling onto the low stool to milk it. The warm, frothy liquid filled the clay pot steadily, the sound a quiet, familiar comfort.

By the time she finished, the sun had lifted fully above the lake, its light scattering across the water in broken shimmers. Juma emerged from the hut, stretching his arms above his head before crouching to relight the fire. Mbwana stumbled out after him, rubbing his eyes with small fists, while Aisha, still half-asleep, clung to his leg.

"Did you milk them all?" Juma asked, poking at the embers with a stick. Neema nodded, setting the pot near the fire. "Enough for today."

He grunted in approval, then reached for the fishing spear leaning against the hut. "I'll check the nets before the wind picks up."

Mbwana perked up at that. "Can I come?"

Juma ruffled his hair. "When you can row the boat."

The boy scowled, but Aisha giggled, already chasing after one of the sheep as it wandered too close to the water. Neema caught her by the waist before she could splash in, earning a squeal of protest.

"Not before eating," she said, steering her back toward the fire where the morning porridge simmered.

Around them, Mwanga was fully awake now. Children darted between huts, their laughter sharp and bright against the steady murmur of adult voices. A group of women walked toward the gardens, hoes balanced on their shoulders, while others gathered at the shore to wash clothes, their chatter rising and falling like the lap of the waves. The fishermen had pushed their boats into the shallows, their calls to one another carrying across the water as they prepared for the day's catch.

Mwanga was not a large village—perhaps thirty families, their huts clustered along the shoreline where the earth was firm and the

fishing good. The people were of the Tongwe, their ancestors having lived on these waters for generations. They knew the lake’s moods, its sudden storms and hidden currents, the way the fish moved with the seasons. They traded with the occasional merchants who came by boat, bartering dried fish and woven baskets for salt, cloth, and sometimes sugar if the season had been kind.

Neema handed Aisha a wooden bowl of porridge before settling beside Juma, who was mending a tear in one of the nets. His fingers moved quickly, the needle flashing as he pulled the twine tight.

"Old Man Daudi says the deep-water catch was thin yesterday," he said, not looking up.

Neema frowned. "The rains came late."

"They always do now."

She didn’t answer. The lake had been less predictable in recent years—the fish fewer, the storms fiercer. Some of the elders muttered that the ancestors were displeased, but Neema thought it was just the way of things. The lake gave, and the lake took.

By midmorning, the sheep were grazing contentedly, the children were playing near the shore under the watchful eye of Old Mama Nyerere, and Neema waded into the shallows beside Juma to help haul in the first nets. The water was cool against her ankles, the silt soft between her toes. The nets were heavy with the morning's catch—small, silvery dagaa, their scales flashing like coins as they spilled onto the woven mats.

Neema sorted them quickly, tossing the ones too small to keep back into the water where they darted away in a frantic shimmer. Aisha and Mbwana crouched nearby, poking at the ones that flopped too close, their laughter ringing over the lake.

For a moment, standing there with the sun warm on her shoulders and her family around her, Neema could almost believe the world was as it should be. They fished all the day long.

In the evening, there was an unusual birds' flight away from the lake, they returned and to mark the end of the day's work. Neema tied the boat to a bollard, as she always did.

Chapter 02:

The Assault

The sun had begun its slow descent behind the trees, painting the sky in streaks of orange and gold as Neema carried the last bundle of firewood back to the hut. The air smelled of smoked fish and earth, the scent of the evening meal already curling from nearby hearths. Aisha, tired from the day's play, leaned against Neema's leg as she walked, her small fingers clutching the fabric of her mother's skirt. Mbwana trotted ahead, balancing a small basket of cassava on his head the way he had seen the older boys do, his bare feet kicking up little puffs of dust.

Inside the hut, Juma was mending a fishing net, his calloused fingers working swiftly as he pulled the needle through the frayed fibers. He glanced up as they entered, offering a tired smile before nodding toward the pot simmering over the fire. "Almost ready," he murmured. Neema set the firewood down and crouched beside the flames, stirring the stew—dagaa fish, cassava leaves, and a handful of precious salt traded from the last merchant boat. Aisha immediately curled into her lap, her eyelids already heavy.

Outside, the village was settling into its evening rhythm. Women carried water from the lake in clay pots balanced on their heads, their laughter soft and familiar. Old Mzee Baraka sat in his usual spot

beneath the mango tree, whittling a piece of wood into something only he could see. The fishermen had returned, their canoes pulled up onto the shore, their voices low as they sorted the day’s catch.

Neema hummed under her breath as she worked, the sound blending with the chirping of crickets and the distant lap of waves against the shore. Aisha’s breathing slowed against her chest, her small body warm and trusting. Mbwana, still restless, poked at the fire with a stick until Juma gently took it from him.

"Go help Mama Nyerere fetch water," he said, nudging the boy toward the door.

Mbwana made a face but obeyed, scampering out into the fading light. Neema watched him go, her heart swelling with the simple, unshakable certainty of this life—the fire, the food, the weight of her daughter in her arms. Then the dogs began to bark again.

Not the usual scattered yelps, but a rising, frantic chorus that made the back of Neema’s neck prickle. Juma’s hands stilled on the net. Across the village, voices hushed. A shout rang out—sharp, terrified. Neema’s blood turned to ice.

The next sound was the unmistakable crack of gunfire. Chaos erupted.

People screamed, scattering in all directions. A woman tripped and fell, her water pot shattering on the ground. Children wailed, their cries piercing the sudden uproar. Neema lurched to her feet, Aisha clutched tight against her chest, just as Juma grabbed her arm and yanked her toward the back of the hut.

"Take them and run," he hissed, shoving a knife into her hand. His eyes were wide, wild. "The cassava fields—go!"

Neema opened her mouth to protest, but another gunshot, closer this time, cut her off. She stumbled backward, her heart hammering, and then she was moving, Aisha’s small arms locked around her neck, her bare feet slapping against the hard-packed earth.

Around her, Mwanga was unraveling.

Rebels poured into the village from the tree line, their rifles glinting in the dying light. They shouted in a mix of Swahili and French, their voices rough with command. A group of them kicked in the door of Old Mama Nyerere’s hut, dragging her out by her thin arms. Another yanked a young girl from where she had been hiding behind a fishing net, her screams shrill with terror.

Neema ducked behind a storage hut, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Aisha whimpered against her shoulder, her tiny body trembling. Where was Mbwana? She had seen him dart toward Mama Nyerere—had he made it to the fields?

A hand closed around her arm, wrenching her forward.

She barely had time to scream before a rifle butt struck her across the temple, sending her crashing to her knees. Aisha tumbled from her arms, wailing. Neema lunged for her, but a boot slammed into her ribs, knocking the breath from her lungs.

"On your feet!" a voice snarled.

Dazed, Neema looked up into the face of a rebel—young, maybe eighteen, his cheeks scarred with ritual markings. He grabbed her by the hair and hauled her upright, shoving her toward a growing cluster of women being herded at gunpoint.

Aisha’s screams followed her. "Mama! Mama!"

Neema thrashed, but another rebel—taller, his teeth filed to points—backhanded her so hard her vision blurred.

"Move, or we shoot them all," he growled.

She turned, just once, searching desperately for any sign of Mbwana, of Juma—but all she saw was smoke and running shadows.

Then she was shoved forward, stumbling into the line of women. Some wept openly; others stood silent, their faces blank with shock. A rebel at the front of the group barked an order, and they were marched toward the lake, where several long canoes waited, their dark shapes bobbing in the water.

Neema’s last glimpse of Mwanga was through a haze of tears—the huts burning, the air thick with smoke, the distant, fading wail of a child calling for her mother.

Then the canoe pushed off, and the night swallowed everything.

Chapter 03:

The Horrible Journey

The lake stretched before them like a vast, indifferent god. At night, its surface swallowed the moon's reflection whole, leaving only blackness and the occasional glint of starlight on restless waves. The canoe cut through the water with quiet treachery, its wooden sides groaning under the weight of stolen lives.

"Keep them quiet," one rebel muttered to another, his voice barely audible over the rhythmic movement of their boat.

The man beside him shrugged, shifting his rifle. "They're already broken."

Neema sat hunched between two other women, her wrists bound with coarse rope that had already rubbed her skin raw. The fisherman's daughter beside her trembled constantly, her breath coming in shallow gasps. The rebels had taken twenty seven women from Mwanga—strong backs for carrying loot, young bodies for the camps, voices they could silence with a look.

"Faster," the lead rebel snapped. "We need to reach the base before the patrols change."

The others grunted in agreement, as the boat was sailing into the deeper water. The Congolese side of the lake was riddled with military checkpoints and rival factions. These men moved like shadows between them, trading women like currency—some to commanders as rewards, others to mining camps where no one asked questions.

As dawn bled across the horizon, the lake transformed. Night's black mirror became a sheet of hammered bronze, the rising sun setting fire to the waves. The rebels shielded their eyes, cursing. Neema stared at the water, her throat parched.

"Give them this," one rebel said, tossing a dented canteen into the women's midst.

The fisherman's daughter lunged for it, but a taller woman snatched it first, gulping desperately before passing it on. By the time it reached Neema, only drops remained. She licked the metal rim, the taste of rust mixing with the lake's brackish scent.

The rebels watched, amused.

"Like animals," one chuckled.

The leader silenced him with a look. "They need to be alive when we deliver them."

As the day wore on, the heat became unbearable. The sun beat down on the canoe's occupants, its glare reflecting off the water until Neema's eyes burned. The fisherman's daughter slumped against her, her skin scorching to the touch.

"Water," the girl whispered, her cracked lips barely moving.

Neema said nothing. There was nothing to say.

A rebel turned to say. "Shut her up."

The man nearest her struck her across the ribs with the butt of his rifle. The girl gasped, choking back her sobs.

Neema closed her eyes. The lake lapped against the canoe, its rhythm indifferent.

"Remember," the leader said lowly, "the commander gets first pick."

The others nodded.

No one spoke. Not when they were shoved into the boat at gunpoint, not when the first girl retched over the side from fear. Words had become dangerous things. Even breathing felt like a risk.

The rebels didn't need to threaten them now. Their presence was enough - the careless way they handled their rifles, the occasional burst of laughter that cut through the dark. They sat at the bow and stern, faceless in the moonlight, their voices low as they passed a bottle between them.

Neema stared at the bottom of the canoe. Water sloshed around her bare feet, mixed with vomit and urine. The fisherman's daughter with calloused hands, trembled constantly. Her skin was fever-hot where it touched Neema's arm.

Night fell without stars. The rebels lit a single kerosene lantern that swayed with the boat's movement, casting monstrous shadows across their faces. One of the younger women—a girl barely fifteen—began to weep silently, her shoulders shaking.

When dawn came, it brought no relief. The sun burned away the mist, exposing the true vastness of the lake. No land in sight, just endless water stretching in every direction. A single canteen was tossed into the women's midst. Hands grabbed at it desperately. Neema didn't fight for her turn - she'd learned better. The water was gone before it reached her.

The second night was worse. Without moonlight, the darkness became absolute. The canoe seemed to float in nothingness,

unmoored from the world. A single lantern cast long, wavering shadows across their faces. One of the women began to sob quietly, the sound muffled against her knees. A rifle butt struck her shoulder - not hard enough to bruise, just enough to remind her. She choked back the tears.

Bodies began to fail. The fisherman's daughter slumped forward, her breathing shallow. When they noticed, she was simply pushed aside like spoiled cargo. By midday, she was gone. They rolled her over the edge without ceremony. The splash was small. The canoe didn't even rock.

Neema watched the water close over the girl's dress - blue patterned cotton, the kind mothers bought at market for their daughters. Then it was gone.

On the third morning, the shore was visible. They grew restless, movements sharper. Ankles were untied but wrists remained bound. Neema's legs screamed when she stood, the blood rushing back in sharp pins. The canoe scraped against sand. They jumped out first, boots sinking into wet shore. The women were yanked forward one by one. Neema stumbled on numb feet, the sudden solidity of land making her dizzy. Behind her, the lake stretched calm and endless, giving no sign of what it had taken.

Chapter 04:

The Looming Fate

The Congolese shore emerged from the lake's haze like a bruise on the horizon—first as a smudge of green, then as a tangle of mangroves with roots like skeletal fingers digging into black mud. The air smelled of rotting fish and gasoline, thick enough to coat Neema's tongue. As the canoe scraped against the bank somewhere near Mpala, a cloud of mosquitoes rose from the stagnant water near the shore, their buzzing merging with the distant growl of an engine.

"Up! Up!" A rebel yanked Neema by her bound wrists, sending fire up her arms. She stumbled onto the shore, her bare feet meeting not soft sand but sharp volcanic rock that bit into tender flesh. The stones burned like embers from the relentless sun, each step sending jolts of pain up her legs. Around her, women gasped as they too were forced onto the punishing ground—some whimpering, others biting their lips bloody to stay silent.

The fisherman's daughter from the canoe trip was gone now, her body left to the lake. Other twenty six remained. Their feet were raw and bleeding, leaving dark smears where they walked. The woman

beside Neema, a mother from Mwanga with cracked toenails, left bloody footprints as she was shoved forward.

A rusted truck idled nearby, its bed already half-filled with women Neema didn't recognize. Their faces were blank with the same hollow exhaustion, their clothes stiff with dried lake water and sweat. Two rebels argued beside the vehicle, their voices sharp over the engine's rumble.

"Twenty only," said the taller one, his uniform sleeves ripped off at the shoulders. "That was the deal."

The other rebel—younger, with a gold-capped tooth—spat into the mud. "They promised twenty crates for twenty four. These are barely alive anyway."

A third man, older with a faded militia tattoo snaking up his neck, cut in. "Twenty for the ammo. The rest go to the camp." He jerked his chin toward a path leading into the jungle. "The commander wants his share."

The chosen twenty were herded toward the truck, their progress agonizingly slow across the razor-sharp shore. One girl—maybe sixteen, with feet swollen to twice their normal size—collapsed

halfway there. A rebel grabbed her by the hair and dragged her the remaining distance, her heels leaving twin trails in the dirt.

The truck's engine roared as it lurched forward, its wheels spraying mud onto the remaining women. Neema watched it disappear down a narrow dirt road swallowed by the jungle, the faces of those inside pressed against the slats like ghosts. She would never know where they were taken.

"Line up!" Gold-Tooth barked at the six remaining women.

The heat was unbearable. The equatorial sun pressed down like a physical weight, turning the mud at their feet into cracked earth within minutes. Neema's dress—once bright yellow—was now a stiff, brownish rag clinging to her burned skin.

Every step toward the camp was torture. The volcanic rocks shifted treacherously underfoot, their edges sharp as broken glass. The woman behind Neema left bloody smears with each shuffling step, her breath coming in shallow gasps. The midday sun turned the stones into branding irons, burning soles already torn to ribbons.

The path became a gauntlet of pain. Jungle vines whipped at their legs as they stumbled forward, the rocks never relenting. The

woman with infected cuts from the canoe now left dark red prints on the stones, her fever-glazed eyes fixed on some distant point.

When the first woman fell and didn't rise, a rebel sighed. "Get up." When she didn't move, he kicked her ribs—once, twice. The sound was hollow, like knocking on rotten wood.

"Leave her," said the older rebel. "The pigs will finish her."

The camp, when it appeared, was a cluster of tattered tents surrounding a gutted colonial-era house. The smell hit first—unwashed bodies, gasoline, and beneath it all, the sweet-rot stench of decaying fruit.

"New stock?" called a man by the fire.

The older rebel nodded. "Six. The commander picks first."

Neema's vision blurred at the edges. The woman beside her—the one with the infected cut—began to shake with fever tremors.

Gold-Tooth noticed. "This one won't last the night."

The older rebel shrugged. "Then someone will have to hurry."

Laughter followed them as the women were shoved toward a fenced pen, its dirt floor littered with empty water bottles. The gate clanged shut behind them. The rebel movements were being observed by some Congolese troops.

Above, the sky was a merciless blue. The lake, now hidden beyond the trees, gave no answer.

In the coming days, new prisoners would follow the same path. Some would whisper that the stones seemed to grow sharper with each passing group, as if the earth itself were conspiring with their captors. Others would swear they could still see the faint outlines of footprints in the rock, permanent reminders of all the feet that had bled before theirs.

But for now, there was only the pain, the heat, and the knowledge that they had walked this far. That their bodies, broken as they were, had carried them this far. And that tomorrow, when the sun rose again, those same feet would be expected to carry them further still.

Chapter 05:

The Rebels

The rebel camp sprawled across a scarred patch of jungle, its borders marked by felled trees sharpened into spikes and trenches filled with rainwater gone foul. Tattered tents and mud-walled huts clustered around the skeleton of an abandoned plantation house, its bullet-pocked columns now strung with rusted washing lines and radio antennas. The air carried a permanent stench of gunpowder, unwashed bodies, and the sweet-rot smell of palm wine fermenting in plastic jugs. This was one node in a vast network of camps that stitched through eastern Congo's rainforest like open wounds, each controlled by factions united only in their opposition to the distant government in Kinshasa.

Life in the camp moved to the rhythm of exploitation. At dawn, guards rousted prisoners from stinking lean-tos to dig in the nearby coltan pits or patrol the jungle paths where government forces might appear. Others sorted loot from raids - sacks of maize, medical supplies still bearing NGO logos, bundles of brightly colored fabric that had once been market goods. The camp's economy ran on theft and coercion; rebels "taxed" nearby villages for protection they didn't provide, while commanders brokered deals with foreign

traders who came under cover of darkness to exchange arms for blood minerals.

Women occupied a precarious place in this system. New arrivals were assessed with the cold pragmatism of livestock buyers - the young and strong sent to mining pits or frontline brothels, the skilled kept for labor, the sick or rebellious disposed of quietly. Neema's cooking had spared her the worst fates, but the reprieve was temporary. The camp thrived on constant turnover, its population ebbing and flowing with the demands of war and the whims of commanders who answered to shadowy benefactors across the border in Rwanda.

The rebellion's origins were buried beneath layers of grievance and greed. Some fighters genuinely believed they were resisting a corrupt government that had abandoned the east to poverty and predation. Others were tribesmen settling ancient scores exacerbated by colonial borders that had forced rival groups together. Many were simply boys with guns who had known nothing but war, their loyalties shifting with the tides of violence. The commanders spoke of liberation, but their actions spoke of plunder - the coltan and gold mined by prisoners disappeared into smuggling networks that funded more weapons, more recruits, more terror.

Kinshasa's neglect fed the rebellion as surely as foreign interference. Government soldiers stationed in the east were often as brutal as the rebels they fought, stealing crops and burning villages suspected of sympathy with the insurgency. The few schools and clinics that existed stood empty, their teachers and doctors long fled. In this vacuum, the camps became self-sustaining ecosystems of violence, their existence justified by the very chaos they created. New captives always asked about UN peacekeepers or army rescues that never came, their hope fading as they learned the terrible truth - in this forgotten war, survival depended on making oneself useful to the machine of rebellion, even as it ground its victims to dust.

The days blurred together in the rebel camp, each one longer and heavier than the last. Neema marked time by the arrival of new women—some hollow-eyed and silent, others screaming until their voices gave out. They came in trucks, in boats, sometimes dragged through the jungle on foot. None stayed long.

The five women who had arrived with Neema were taken one by one. First the young mother with the burn scar on her shoulder, sent north with a group of fighters. Then the tall girl who could weave baskets, traded for ammunition. Last was the quiet one who had shared her water ration, loaded onto a truck heading east.

Neema remained.

She had discovered this small mercy on her third week in camp, when a rebel captain tasted the thin porridge she made from moldy maize.

"This one cooks," he had said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Now the kitchen became her prison. A rusted iron pot hung over an open fire, its bottom blackened from constant use. Each morning, rebels tossed whatever they had stolen at her feet—a sack of rice crawling with weevils, bony fish from the river, once even a scrawny chicken she had to pluck with her fingernails.

"Make it good," they would say, as if flavor could mask the rot.

Neema cooked. She stirred pots with a stick that burned her palms. She picked maggots from grain with methodical precision. When the rebels brought spices stolen from some village market, she crushed them between stones and pretended not to see the blood still under her nails.

The nights were worse.

She slept in a lean-to behind the kitchen, its roof patched with plastic bags. The lock on the door was broken, the wooden bar she pushed against it meaningless. Some nights they came for her. Other nights they didn't. There was no pattern, no way to prepare.

Between the cooking and the darkness, Neema's mind wandered home. She remembered Juma's hands, calloused from fishing nets but gentle when he touched her face. Mbwana's laughter as he chased chickens through the yard. Aisha's small weight against her hip as she stirred the evening meal.

The memories were sharp as knives, but she clung to them. In the quiet moments before dawn, when the camp slept off its liquor and lust, Neema would close her eyes and walk through Mwanga in her mind. Past the mango tree where the elders sat. Down to the shore where the fishing boats rocked. Home.

One morning, as she sorted through another sack of infested grain, a new group of women stumbled into camp. Their feet left bloody prints in the dirt. One girl, no older than Aisha would be now, caught Neema's eye.

The rebels noticed her looking.

"Cook for us tonight," one said, slapping the back of her head. "Make it special."

Neema nodded and went back to picking out bugs. Her hands didn't shake. Her face showed nothing.

But that night, as she stirred the pot, she let the rice burn just a little. Not enough to punish. Just enough to remember that she could.

The rebels ate it anyway.

Tomorrow there would be more women. More cooking. More nights.

But somewhere beyond the jungle, beyond the lake, Mwanga still existed. And as long as it lived in her mind, Neema would too.

Section II:

The Turn

Chapter 6:

The Raid

The night shattered with the first explosion—a grenade tearing through the rebel command post, sending splintered wood and body parts raining down. Then the gunfire erupted, muzzle flashes cutting through the darkness like strobes.

The Congolese soldiers advanced in a lethal wave, their boots crushing abandoned cooking pots, their rifles sweeping left to right. A rebel stumbled out of a tent, still half-drunk, and took three rounds to the chest before he could raise his weapon. His body jerked like a puppet before collapsing into the mud.

"Kill them all!" a sergeant roared.

The rebels scrambled, some half-dressed, others barefoot, grabbing AK-47s and firing blindly. A soldier went down, his throat torn open by a stray round. Another took a bullet to the leg, screaming as he crumpled behind a burning jeep.

The rebels fought like cornered animals. One, a boy no older than sixteen, emptied his magazine into the advancing troops before a

burst of automatic fire cut him nearly in half. Another rebel, face streaked with ash, lunged from behind a tent with a machete—only for a soldier to blow his skull apart at point-blank range.

Blood pooled in the dirt, black in the moonlight.

The surviving rebels broke. They sprinted for the tree line, their shadows swallowed by the jungle. A few soldiers fired after them, but the darkness and the thick foliage made the shots useless. Silence fell, broken only by the moans of the dying.

Fifteen rebels lay dead—some sprawled where they had fallen, others curled into final, agonized positions. Three soldiers had been lost. Their comrades stripped them of ammunition before dragging their bodies toward the trucks.

No one buried the rebels. The jungle would take care of that.

The air stank of gunpowder and burning fuel. Somewhere, a wounded man whimpered until a single shot silenced him forever.

The soldiers moved through the wreckage of the rebel camp with cold efficiency, their boots kicking aside spent bullet casings that glittered like copper coins in the morning light. They rolled corpses onto their backs with their rifle barrels, checking for signs of life before stripping them of anything valuable - ammunition pouches still heavy with rounds, knives with notched blades, the occasional wristwatch or necklace looted from some forgotten village. One

young private gagged as he pulled a pistol from a dead rebel's waistband, the man's intestines spilling out in a slick, purple coil.

The camp's pathetic treasures were gathered with practiced speed. Half-rotten sacks of maize flour were tossed into the trucks, along with dented pots and a plastic jerrycan of palm oil that leaked golden tears onto the dirt. In what had been the commander's tent, a sergeant found a rusted lockbox containing stacks of Congolese francs stuck together with blood, which he divided silently among his men. Nearby, another soldier pawed through a pile of stolen clothes, holding up a child's dress for mock inspection before tossing it into the flames now consuming the supply tents.

They worked around the bodies - fifteen rebels left where they fell, their limbs already stiffening into grotesque poses. A fly-covered hand still clutched a broken radio. A bare foot twitched in the breeze, though its owner was clearly dead. The three fallen soldiers were treated with more dignity, their IDs and dog tags collected, their weapons placed reverently beside their corpses in the transport truck. One rebel, barely alive with a sucking chest wound, was given the mercy of a pistol round between the eyes when discovered hiding beneath a tarp.

Near the smoldering remains of the kitchen, a private paused to stare at a cooking pot still suspended over cold ashes - the last meal Neema had prepared before the raid. He stirred the congealed

porridge with his finger, sniffed it, then spat into the fire before moving on. The only living creature left in the camp was the commander's scrawny rooster, which strutted between corpses pecking at scraps, its red feathers bright as fresh blood against the destruction.

By midday, nothing remained worth taking. The soldiers doused the last standing structures with gasoline, the flames roaring up with a sound like rushing water. As the trucks rumbled away toward the army base, the first vultures began circling overhead, their shadows passing over the abandoned dead like fleeting memories of the men they had once been. The jungle would erase this place within weeks - vines swallowing bullet holes, termites devouring wooden posts, rains washing the blood into the thirsty earth. Only the deep ruts left by military tires would remain, fading scars leading nowhere.

Neema and the three other women were herded toward a military truck, its engine growling like a chained beast. A soldier shoved her up into the bed, where other prisoners already huddled—some weeping, others staring blankly at the flames.

"Are they saving us?" a girl whispered beside her.

Neema didn’t answer.

The truck rumbled to life, lurching forward before the tailgate was even closed. The camp disappeared behind them, swallowed by smoke and gunfire.

For a moment, hope flickered.

Then the soldier nearest her grabbed a woman by the hair, forcing her to look at him.

"You fed them," he snarled. "You kept them strong."

The woman tried to protest, but he backhanded her across the face.

Neema looked away—only to lock eyes with one of the soldiers standing near the cab.

Caporal Koffi.

He wore the same uniform as the others, the same hardened expression. But his grip on his rifle tightened as he watched the woman being struck. For a heartbeat, his gaze met Neema’s.

Then he turned away.

The truck roared down the dirt road, carrying them deeper into the night. The soldiers didn’t speak to the women. Didn’t offer water. Didn’t explain where they were going. Neema stared at her bleeding feet. The rebels were gone.

But the war wasn’t over.

Chapter 7:

The Military Camp

The military camp throbbed with drunken laughter and gunfire long before the trucks rolled through the gates. Soldiers spilled from their barracks, bottles of warm beer clutched in their hands, their voices hoarse from singing victory songs since dawn. The air smelled of roasting meat—two goats stolen from a nearby village now turning on spits over open fires, their fat dripping into the flames with sharp hisses.

Neema and the other women were dragged from the trucks into this chaos. The soldiers barely glanced at them, too caught up in their celebration. A group of young recruits fired their AK-47s into the air, the spent casings raining down onto the dirt like metallic hail. Someone had hooked up a generator to a pair of blown-out speakers, and the tinny wail of Lingala music fought against the noise of shouting men.

Tables had been set up near the command post, sagging under the weight of looted liquor—Ugandan waragi, South African brandy, even a few bottles of European whiskey with labels none of these men could read. A captain with bloodshot eyes poured shots directly into his subordinates' mouths, laughing when they choked.

In the center of it all, the rebel commander's severed head sat on a pike, its lips already blackening in the heat. Flies gathered at its eyelids. Someone had shoved a cigarette between its teeth.

The women were forced toward a fenced pen, its dirt floor trampled by countless boots. No one gave them water. No one checked their wounds. The soldiers' celebration rolled on around them—a private pissing against the fence, his stream splashing near a woman's feet; another drunkenly demanding one of the prisoners dance for him before his friends pulled him away.

Neema pressed her back against the fence and watched.

Then the fireworks started.

Some enterprising soul had rigged up rebel grenades to explode in sequence, sending flashes of orange and white bursting over the camp. The soldiers whooped, their shadows stretching and twisting against the barracks walls like a grotesque puppet show. Neema closed her eyes.

Somewhere beyond this noise, beyond the gunsmoke and the stink of burning meat, the lake still lapped at its shores. Somewhere, the

world continued. But not here. Not tonight. The days bled together in a cycle of dust, sweat, and exhaustion.

At dawn, Sergeant Bakari roused the men by slamming his baton against the barracks' tin walls. Soldiers rolled from their cots, scratching at flea bites, their uniforms stiff with dried sweat. Briwa Dabo—barely seventeen—was always last to rise, earning him extra latrine duty.

Morning inspection was a ritual of neglect. Lieutenant Mputu pretended to check weapons while Corporal Nzinga pocketed bribes to overlook missing ammunition. The women prisoners stood in line to be counted, their water rations shrinking each week.

By midday, the camp baked under the scorching sun. Private Kayembe and Private Luzolo slumped in the watchtower, trading rumors instead of watching for rebels. Below them, recruits half-heartedly drilled in the dirt square, their formations dissolving into laughter when Sergeant Bakari turned away.

The kitchen was a realm of drudgery. Neema and two other women pounded cassava into flour, their hands cracked and bleeding from the heavy mortar. A pot of thin porridge simmered endlessly over the fire, its smell clinging to their skin. Soldiers shoved past to grab

portions, sometimes spitting into the pot just to watch the women flinch.

At the armory, Corporal Nzinga conducted his shadow economy—trading bullets for homebrew liquor, his ledger full of lies. The rifles grew rustier with each passing week.

As dusk fell, Caporal Koffi took his solitary post by the lake. The night watch was punishment duty—hours of staring at black water, watching for rebel canoes that never appeared. The others mocked him, but Koffi preferred the silence to the barracks' reek of unwashed bodies and sour alcohol.

Some nights, the lake played tricks—ripples that might have been paddles, shadows that could have been boats. Most nights, there was only the moon on the water and the distant hum of insects.

By dawn, when his shift ended, the camp would already be stirring—Private Dabo hauling water buckets, Lieutenant Mputu recounting the same crates of dwindling supplies, the women prisoners blinking awake to another identical day.

The rebels did not come. The lake gave no answers. The war continued somewhere beyond the trees, leaving them trapped in this endless, stagnant routine. Two months passed.

Chapter 08:

The Rebels’ Attack

The first mortar hit just as the sun dipped below the trees. Koffi was at the lakeshore, rolling a cigarette between his fingers, when the explosion tore through the eastern barracks. The ground shook. A column of fire and debris erupted into the twilight sky. For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then—gunfire.

Not the sporadic pops of drunken soldiers shooting at shadows, but the relentless staccato of an organized assault. The rebels had come.

Koffi dropped the cigarette. His training screamed at him to run toward the fight, but instinct held him still. The camp was chaos—figures sprinting, muzzle flashes lighting up the gathering dark. Another mortar struck, this time near the armory. The resulting explosion sent a fireball rolling into the sky, illuminating the lake’s surface in flickering orange. They were overrun.

He turned to the water. His patrol boat—little more than a dinghy with an outboard motor—bobbed gently in the shallows. A scream cut through the night. Close.

Koffi didn’t think. He waded into the lake, the cold water soaking his boots, and hauled himself into the boat. The motor coughed to life on the third pull.

As he pushed away from shore, the camp burned behind him. Shadows moved at the tree line—rebels pouring into the compound. A soldier ran toward the lake, arms waving. A burst of gunfire cut him down. Koffi didn’t look back.

He gunned the motor, the little boat skimming across the black water. Bullets whined past, slicing the surface into tiny geysers. One pinged off the outboard, but the motor held.

The shore receded. The sounds of battle faded. Soon, there was only the growl of the engine, the slap of waves against the hull, and the vast, uncaring dark of the lake.

Koffi didn’t stop until the fires were just pinpricks in the distance. Then he killed the motor and let the boat drift. Alone in the silence, he finally let his hands shake. The night swallowed him whole.

The sun hung heavy in the sky when Koffi’s boat scraped against the blackened shore the next afternoon. The air smelled of charred wood and something thicker, darker—the scent of burned flesh clinging to the back of his throat.

The camp was gone.

Not overrun, not looted—erased.

The rebels had torched everything. The barracks were skeletal remains of ash and twisted metal. The watchtower had collapsed into itself, its timbers reduced to glowing embers. Even the bodies of the fallen soldiers had been dragged into a great pyre near the center of the camp, their forms now unrecognizable mounds of blackened bone and melted uniform fabric.

Koffi moved carefully, his rifle useless in his hands. There was nothing left to defend. No one left to fight.

The rebels had taken everything—weapons, supplies, even the rusted cooking pots from the kitchen. Only the things they couldn’t use remained: a handful of scattered shell casings, the bloated corpse of a dog, the iron frame of a cot jutting from the ashes like a grave marker.

He made his way to the mess hall, its walls half-collapsed but still standing. Beneath a pile of smoldering debris, the hidden armory

door remained intact—just a sheet of corrugated iron disguised as part of the floor, invisible unless you knew where to look.

Koffi knelt, his fingers brushing hot metal as he pried it open. The cool darkness of the hidden room yawned beneath him, untouched by the destruction above.

For a moment, he simply stared into that darkness. His pack was down there. His few possessions. A way forward.

Behind him, the wind stirred the ashes of the camp, sending up spirals of gray dust that stung his eyes.

He would take what he needed. Then he would walk away. The rebels had left nothing behind. Neither would he.

Chapter 09:

The Thirst

The air inside the hidden room was thick and stale, carrying the metallic scent of ammunition and the damp earth beneath the floorboards. Koffi’s eyes adjusted slowly to the dim light filtering through the cracked door behind him. Then he saw her.

Neema sat slumped against the far wall, her wrists bound by rusted chains bolted to the floor. Her once-yellow dress was now a filthy rag, her collarbones sharp beneath her skin. Her lips were cracked, her eyes hollow—not with fear, but with the dull resignation of someone who had stopped expecting mercy. When the door opened, she didn’t look up at first. Then, slowly, her gaze lifted to Koffi’s face. "Water," she croaked.

Koffi hesitated. His pack lay just beyond her, but his canteen was still clipped to his belt. He unhooked it and stepped toward her, his boots scuffing against the dirt floor. Then—his foot caught on a loose floorboard. The canteen slipped from his grip, hitting the ground with a dull thud before tipping over. Water gushed out, darkening the soil near Neema’s feet.

For a heartbeat, neither moved. Then Neema lunged. She collapsed forward, her chains clanking as she pressed her mouth to the damp

earth, sucking at the mud like an animal. Two desperate gulps—that was all she managed before the ground swallowed the last of the water. She stayed there, forehead pressed to the dirt, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Koffi stared at her. He had seen worse. Done worse. He was no savior—just a man who had followed orders, who had stood by while women like Neema were dragged into trucks, who had looked away when the screams got too loud. But this—this was different.

Without a word, he knelt beside her and examined the chains. The lock was old, the key likely tossed aside by whoever had left her here. Colonel Mputu, probably. The man had always had his secrets. Koffi reached into his pocket for his knife. The lock gave way with a sharp crack.

Neema didn’t move at first, as if she didn’t believe it was real. Then, slowly, she pulled her wrists free, the raw skin beneath the cuffs glistening in the dim light. Koffi stood, slinging his pack over his shoulder. Neema looked up at him, her eyes still empty. Waiting for the next horror. But Koffi just jerked his chin toward the door.

The sun hung low over the ruined camp when Koffi emerged from the hidden room, his pack slung over one shoulder. He did not look back, did not speak. Behind him, chains clinked faintly, then fell silent. A shadow moved at the edge of his vision.

Neema stepped into the light, her bare feet leaving shallow prints in the ash. She did not wait for invitation or instruction. She simply followed, her gait unsteady but deliberate, as if pulled forward by some silent understanding.

The lake was calm. Koffi waded into the shallows, his hands slicing through the water with practiced efficiency. Fish flashed silver as he tossed them onto the bank—one, then another. Neema watched from a distance, her arms wrapped around herself.

The fire smoked more than it burned. Koffi speared the fish on green sticks, holding them too close to the flames. The skin blackened instantly, the flesh beneath turning to dry ash. He pulled one free, grimacing as it crumbled between his fingers.

A hand appeared in his periphery. Neema reached for the remaining fish, her movements slow but certain. She stripped away the charred skin with her nails, repositioned the sticks over glowing embers. The scent changed—smoke giving way to something richer, the fat rendering properly now.

They ate without plates, without words. Koffi chewed methodically, his gaze fixed on the horizon. Neema picked bones clean with her fingers, her eyes downcast. The silence between them was not comfortable, but it was not hostile either. It simply was—a quiet acknowledgment of hunger shared, of a meal prepared and consumed in mutual survival.

Chapter 10:

Implications

The land around her was a circle of dangers, each direction offering a different kind of death. To the east stretched Lake Tanganyika's vast, uncaring waters - the same shore where she was brought from Mwanga, now just a memory across the impossible distance. The lake that had carried her away in chains now separated her from home, its expanse too wide to swim, its currents treacherous, its shores patrolled by rebels who would recognize an escaped captive instantly.

To the west rose the steep escarpments and jungles of the Congo interior - a tangle of rebel hideouts and militia camps where no laws reached. The trees concealed armed groups who would kill her for her clothes or keep her as a slave in their forest strongholds. To the north lay more military checkpoints where soldiers would see a lone woman as either a spy or a plaything. To the south, the shoreline curved toward unknown villages where strangers might turn her in for reward money or worse.

The immediate threats were just as relentless. Hunger had hollowed her to bones barely holding together. Thirst made her lightheaded - the lake water undrinkable without fire to purify it, the few streams

either dried up or guarded. Night was coming, bringing cold that would seep into her malnourished body and darkness that hid both beasts and men more dangerous. Every scratch on her bare feet risked infection, every misstep a potential injury that would leave her helpless.

The land offered no safe paths, only choices between different versions of dying. The lake that had once been life now stretched as an impassable barrier between her and anything familiar. The water shimmered with cruel indifference, reflecting a sky that had witnessed everything and cared for nothing.

In that desolate landscape of unrelenting threats, Koffi represented the only flicker of precarious survival. He was not hope—not kindness nor salvation—but simply the least immediate danger in a world where every other option meant certain suffering or death.

Neema did not follow him out of trust. She followed because he was the only known entity in a universe of predators. He had already shown her the barest flicker of indifference that aligned, however briefly, with her survival—unlocking chains, leaving water within reach, not striking her when he easily could have. These were not mercies, but they were patterns she could predict.

In a land where every stranger was a potential killer, Koffi was at least a killer whose reactions she had begun to measure. Where rebels would drag her back to torment, and soldiers would use her as they pleased, Koffi merely tolerated her presence with scowls and muttered curses. That was better. That was something she could work with.

He was also her only connection to the lake's western shore—the one person who might, if pressed, know where boats could be found, where paths might lead, where the next horror lay. Without him, she was utterly alone, navigating a maze of dangers blind. With him, there was at least the sliver of a chance—not that he would help her, but that his own self-interest might, by accident, leave room for her to survive.

Koffi walked. And so she kept fifteen paces behind him, not because she believed in him, but because he was the last remaining thread tethering her to a world that hadn't yet fully dissolved into violence. If he vanished, there would be nothing left but the wilderness and its teeth.

The dust clung to his boots, the sun pressing down on his shoulders like a physical weight. Thirteen kilometers to the army camp. Thirteen kilometers of open scrubland, where the only movement was the occasional scuttle of a lizard or the distant cry of a hawk.

He did not look back.

Her bare feet left faint impressions in the dirt, her steps uneven but persistent. She did not call out to him. Did not ask for help. She simply moved, a silent shadow trailing his path.

Koffi ignored her.

He had no canteen to offer. No words of comfort. No interest in playing protector. The war had carved out whatever softness might have once existed in him, leaving only the hardened shell of a soldier who knew better than to take on unnecessary burdens.

At a fork in the trail, where the path split toward a cluster of skeletal trees, he paused—just long enough to adjust the strap of his rifle. The woman stopped too, her breathing shallow but controlled.

He didn’t turn. Didn’t acknowledge her.

The wind stirred the dust between them.

Then he took the left path, his pace unchanging.

The woman followed.

It wasn’t mercy that kept him from driving her off. It wasn’t pity. It was indifference. If she wanted to walk the same road, that was her choice. But he would not slow for her. Would not share what little he had. Would not pretend her survival mattered to him.

The army camp waited ahead. Orders. Structure. A return to the only life he knew.

Behind him, the woman kept pace, her presence as unremarkable as the heat or the dust.

Koffi didn’t care where she was from. Didn’t care what had happened to her village. Didn’t care if she lived or died. He walked. She followed. That was all.

Section III:

The Trap

Chapter 11:

The Capture

The scent of ripe guavas hit them before they saw the man—a sweet, cloying smell cutting through the dry air. He emerged from the scrubland, a woven basket balanced on his head, fat green fruits spilling over the edges. Koffi’s hand went to his rifle.

"Give me the basket," he ordered, his voice rough.

The man froze. His eyes darted from Koffi’s weapon to the woman standing fifteen paces back. Then, without warning, he let out a shrill, birdlike shriek that tore through the stillness.

From behind the trees, seven men materialized—lean, hard-faced, their clothes a mix of rebel scraps and civilian rags. Koffi barely had time to swing his rifle up before they were on him.

A shot cracked the air. One rebel stumbled, clutching his shoulder, but didn’t go down. The others swarmed.

Koffi fought—elbows, knees, the butt of his rifle—but there were too many. They disarmed him in seconds, wrenching his arms behind his back. Neema didn’t resist at all. She stood motionless as they bound her wrists, her face blank.

The rebels worked quickly, efficiently. Coarse ropes bit into Koffi’s skin as they lashed him to a gnarled acacia tree. Neema was tied to another a few feet away, her back against the bark.

The guava man—no farmer after all—circled them, grinning. He plucked a fruit from his basket and took an exaggerated bite, juice running down his chin. "Caporal," he sneered at Koffi. Then nodded at Neema. "And his comfort."

Koffi strained against the ropes, but they held fast. The rebel with the wounded shoulder spat at his feet. One of the others lit a cigarette. "What do we do with them?" The guava man shrugged. "The commander will decide."

Neema’s eyes met Koffi’s across the space between them. No fear. No accusation. Just a quiet, weary understanding. The rebels debated, laughed, passed the guavas around.

The rebels built their fire high, the flames licking at the night sky as shadows danced across their grinning faces. The smell of roasting

meat—a stolen goat, its carcass skewered on a spit—mixed with the sour tang of banana liquor passed from hand to hand.

One of them, a lanky fighter with gold-capped teeth, kicked dirt at Koffi’s feet. "Caporal, you will be very delicious if fried," he sneered, taking a long swig from the bottle before passing it to the next man. "Your friends at the camp? All ash now, we ate their meat." Laughter rippled through the group. Another rebel, his face scarred from old battles, sauntered over to Neema. He crouched in front of her, tilting his head as if studying an animal.

"Pretty for a ghost," he mused, reaching out to tug at her matted hair. She didn’t flinch. Didn’t react at all. His grin widened. "Chief will like you."

The others whooped, banging their bottles together in drunken approval. One of them pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette, lighting it with an ember from the fire before taking a deep drag. The smoke curled lazily into the night.

Another rebel, younger than the rest, strummed a battered guitar missing two strings. The tune was off-key, the lyrics slurred, but the others joined in anyway, their voices rough and loud.

"Sing, army man!" One shouted at Koffi, throwing a bone at him. It bounced off his chest, leaving a greasy smear on his shirt. "Sing before the chief cuts your tongue out!" More laughter. The fire crackled, sparks spiraling upward like fleeing fireflies.

Neema stayed silent, her gaze fixed on the dirt between her feet. But her fingers, hidden in the shadows, tested the ropes—slowly, carefully.

The rebels didn’t notice. They were too busy drinking, too busy bragging about the raids they’d run, the soldiers they’d killed, the villages they’d burned. The chief was coming. And when he arrived, there would be no more laughter. Only blood. Until then, they celebrated.

The ropes bit deeper into Koffi's wrists with every futile twist. Blood slicked his skin, making the fibers stick to his raw flesh. Across the clearing, Neema sat motionless against her tree, her head bowed like a broken-necked bird. The rebels' fire had burned low, their drunken laughter replaced by the occasional snore.

Then—footsteps. A rebel staggered toward Neema, his belt already unbuckled. Moonlight glinted off the dagger in his hand.

"You give me comfort, maybe I don't wake the others," he slurred, the blade flashing as he turned it lazily between his fingers. Koffi tensed, his muscles coiling uselessly against his bonds. Neema lifted her head. Her voice came out hoarse but clear: "Yes."

The rebel grinned. He placed the dagger between his teeth, the steel catching the faint light as he leaned down to work on her ropes. His fingers fumbled at the knots, his breath reeking of banana liquor.

The ropes fell away. Neema moved faster than Koffi would have thought possible. Her hand shot up, snatching the dagger from the rebel's teeth in one fluid motion. Before he could even register the loss, she dragged the blade across his throat—a single, vicious pull that opened his neck like a second mouth. Blood sprayed hot across her face.

The rebel's hands flew to his throat, his eyes bulging. No sound came out—just wet, choking gasps as he crumpled to his knees.

Neema didn't watch him fall. She was already at Koffi's side, the dagger slicing through his ropes with frantic precision. The moment his hands came free, she pressed the bloody blade into his palm. No words. No hesitation. They ran.

Behind them, chaos erupted—a shout, then another. A gunshot cracked the night air, the bullet whining past Koffi's ear. More voices joined the fray, angry and confused.

The jungle swallowed them whole, branches whipping at their faces, roots snagging their feet. Koffi could hear the rebels crashing through the undergrowth behind them, their curses getting closer.

Neema's breath came in ragged gasps beside him, but she didn't slow. Didn't look back. The dagger in Koffi's hand was still warm with blood. And the night, vast and uncaring, stretched on before them. The jungle fought them every step of the way.

Vines like skeletal fingers snatched at their ankles. Thorn-studded branches raked their arms raw. The ground, uneven and treacherous, threatened to twist their feet with every panicked stride. Koffi led the way, his stolen dagger flashing as he hacked at the undergrowth, but the jungle swallowed their path behind them almost instantly. The rebels were not far behind.

They could hear them—crashing through the brush, shouting to one another in their guttural tongue. The occasional gunshot split the night, sending birds screeching into the canopy. Bullets whined through the leaves, too close, too random.

Neema stumbled, her bare feet torn by rocks and thorns. She caught herself on a tree trunk, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Koffi didn’t stop. Didn’t look back. If she fell, she fell. But she didn’t. She pushed off, forcing her legs to move, even as blood slicked the earth beneath her steps.

The terrain grew worse. The earth sloped upward, the roots tangling like serpents beneath their feet. The rebels’ voices grew louder—closer. Koffi risked a glance back. Torchlight flickered between the trees, bobbing like fireflies. They were gaining. He turned and ran harder. Neema matched him, her silence more terrifying than any scream.

The jungle thinned suddenly, giving way to a rocky outcrop. Beyond it, the land dropped away into a ravine, the bottom lost to shadow. No time to think. Koffi grabbed Neema’s wrist and jumped. They hit the slope hard, tumbling over sharp stone and brittle brush. The world spun—sky, earth, pain.

At the bottom, Koffi rolled to his knees, dagger still clenched in his fist. Neema lay a few feet away, her chest heaving.

Above them, the rebels reached the edge. Torchlight danced over the rocks. A voice cursed. "They are here," they ran again.

Chapter 12:

The Boat Theft

The first gray light of morning crept over the horizon as they stumbled onto the rocky shore of Lake Tanganyika. Behind them, the rebels' shouts still cut through the predawn silence, their torches flickering between the trees like vengeful spirits.

Koffi's hands were raw and shaking as he fumbled with the fisherman's knot of the iron chain securing the boat. The boat was pulling the chain, Koffi's fingers were slick with blood. Every second stretched too long—every breath too loud.

Neema shouldered past him.

Her hands, though just as battered, moved with swift precision. She knew the weakness in the knot, twisted, pulled—and the rope slithered free like a dead snake. She was a fisherman's wife - knew nets and knots well - after all.

No words. No hesitation.

They shoved the boat into the shallows, the cold water biting at their legs. Koffi scrambled in first, grabbing the oars as Neema pushed them deeper before hauling herself over the side.

The first rebel burst from the tree line just as the boat cleared the rocks.

"Stop!" The command was a snarl, followed by the crack of a rifle.

The bullet struck the water inches from the hull, sending up a sharp spray. Koffi didn’t look back. He dug the oars into the lake, his muscles burning with the effort. Neema knelt at the bow, her gaze locked on the shrinking shoreline.

More rebels emerged, their rifles raised. Muzzle flashes lit the gloom. Bullets peppered the water around them, one glancing off the stern with a metallic ping.

But the lake was vast. The boat, though slow, was already beyond accurate range.

The rebels’ shouts faded into the distance, swallowed by the growing light.

Koffi rowed until his arms threatened to give out. Until the shore was nothing but a dark smudge against the dawn.

Only then did he pause, his breath ragged. Neema still stared at the horizon, her face unreadable. The boat drifted. The sun rose. And the lake, indifferent, carried them forward.

The first golden light spilled over the mountains, setting the lake's surface ablaze. Tanganyika stretched before them like liquid mercury, its vast expanse shimmering with hues of rose and amber as the sun climbed higher. The water was so clear they could see the occasional flash of silver as fish darted beneath the boat, their shapes distorted by the gentle ripples.

A flock of white egrets took flight from the reeds along the distant shore, their wings beating in perfect unison as they soared over the water. The morning air carried the crisp scent of wet stone and freshwater, so pure it almost erased the lingering stench of sweat and blood. Near the boat, a kingfisher plunged into the water with a splash, emerging moments later with a fish clutched in its beak, its feathers iridescent in the dawn light. The lake had always been a giver of life. Now, it was their salvation.

The rebels' shouts had long since faded, their torches extinguished by distance and daylight. The water that had once carried Neema to

captivity now carried her away, its currents indifferent to the wars of men. The same breeze that had filled rebel sails now pushed their stolen boat.

Koffi's oars dipped silently, each stroke sending small ripples across the glassy surface. A family of otters surfaced nearby, their dark eyes curious before they vanished beneath the waves. The lake teemed with life—unconcerned, untouched by the violence on its shores. Neema trailed her fingers in the water, watching the sunlight dance across the wake. The rebels could not follow them here. The lake had decided. And for now, it was enough.

The rising sun revealed their stolen boat drifting northward, its worn wooden hull carving a fragile path through the glassy water. Each pull of the oars brought Koffi closer to the army camp - thirteen kilometers shrinking to twelve, then eleven. The lake's currents seemed to conspire with his purpose, carrying them steadily along the shoreline where the jungle gave way to scattered fishing villages.

Neema sat motionless at the bow, watching the western shore recede. Every stroke of the oars carried her further from Mwanga, from whatever remnants might still stand. The morning light revealed the network of scars on her feet - some fresh from their flight, others older, whitened by time.

A fish eagle's cry echoed across the water as it circled above them, its amber eyes sharp against the blue. The bird dove suddenly, talons breaking the surface in a spray of diamonds, emerging with a thrashing tilapia. Nature's indifference to their struggle played out all around them - cormorants drying their wings on half-submerged logs, hippos grunting in distant reed beds, the occasional silver flicker of sardine shoals beneath their boat.

Koffi rowed with mechanical precision, his gaze fixed on the northern horizon where smoke from the army camp's morning fires would soon appear. The oars creaked in their locks, the sound marking time like a grim metronome.

The lake that had saved them now carried them toward an uncertain fate - Koffi to the harsh discipline of military reckoning, Neema to a world where no shore promised safety. Yet for these suspended hours, the water granted them respite.

A crocodile slid soundlessly from a mudbank ahead, its armored back breaking the surface in a series of ripples that rocked their boat gently. Neither flinched. They had survived worse monsters. The sun climbed higher. The oars dipped and rose. And the lake, ever impartial, carried them where they would go.

Chapter 13:

Sprouting Hope

The boat scraped against the shore, its hull whispering over wet sand. Koffi kept his eyes on the tree line ahead, where the smoke of the army camp curled into the late afternoon sky. He did not look at Neema as he spoke.

"Why aren’t you going home?" His voice was rough, as if the words were stones he had to dislodge from his throat. "I freed you yesterday."

Silence. Then, barely audible over the lap of water:

"I’m from the eastern shore. I don’t know how to cross the lake."

Koffi’s jaw tightened. He turned slightly, just enough to see her in his periphery. She sat rigid at the bow, her hands resting on her knees, fingers curled like dead leaves.

"Tanzania or Zambia?" he asked.

"Tanzania."

The word hung between them. Koffi exhaled through his nose. The camp was close now. He could make out the shapes of soldiers moving near the perimeter.

"In two hours, I'll be there." He gestured toward the smoke. "You know that's no place for you."

Neema said nothing.

"I'm not..." He trailed off, then tried again. "I don't want you suffering more. But I can't take you with me. Where will you go?"

Her eyes stayed fixed on the horizon. "I don't know. The rebels will find me. Or your soldiers will."

The truth of it settled over them. Koffi rubbed his temple, his thoughts churning.

"Sometimes," he said at last, "military cargo ships sail to Tanzania. For supplies." He paused. "I'll check if one leaves tonight. Or tomorrow."

Neema's gaze flicked toward him, just for a second.

"If there's a ship," he continued, "I'll come back at dawn to tell you. Wait here. If I don't return..." He let the implication hang. Assume I'm dead. Or that I abandoned you.

Neema nodded once. "Hmm."

Koffi knew the unspoken truth—those ships were no sanctuary. Soldiers traded women across the lake as casually as sacks of flour. But it was the only chance he could offer.

The boat ground to a halt on the shore. Koffi stood as if to sling his rifle over his shoulder—but it had been left behind with the rebels.

He didn’t offer a hand. Didn’t say goodbye. He simply stepped into the shallows and walked toward the camp without looking back.

Neema watched him go. Then she pulled the boat farther onto the sand, her movements slow but deliberate.

The lake murmured behind her. Somewhere in the trees, a nightjar began its evening call.

She sat down on the damp shore, her arms wrapped around her knees, and waited.

For the ship. For Koffi. For dawn. Or for nothing at all.

The boat creaked softly as Neema watched Koffi’s figure grow smaller, swallowed by the tall grass leading to the army camp. When he disappeared completely, she exhaled—a slow, measured breath—and turned her attention to the shore.

Her stomach twisted with hunger, a dull ache that had settled deep over days of scraps and survival. The lake’s edge gave way to a dense thicket of wild fig and guava trees, their branches heavy with ripe fruit. The scent of sweetness cut through the damp earth smell of the shore, making her mouth water.

Neema dragged the boat farther onto the sand, the fibers of the rope biting into her palms. She scanned the tree line—no movement, no voices. This close to the army camp, rebels wouldn’t risk patrols, and soldiers rarely ventured beyond their perimeter unless ordered.

She moved quietly, her bare feet sinking into the cool mud as she approached the nearest fig tree. The first fruit she plucked was soft, its skin splitting under her fingers, revealing pink flesh studded with seeds. She ate it in two bites, the juice running down her chin. The taste was overwhelming—cloying and floral, so different from the gruel and charred fish of the last months.

For a moment, she simply stood there, eating, the figs’ sticky syrup coating her fingers. Then, methodically, she began to gather more, tucking them into the folds of her dress. Guavas followed, their green skins still firm, their centers tart and bright when she bit into one.

The shadows lengthened as she worked. Somewhere in the canopy above, a hornbill clattered its beak, then took flight in a burst of crimson feathers. Neema froze, listening.

No footsteps. No rustle of approaching men. Just the wind through the leaves and the distant lap of water.

She ate until her stomach protested, then gathered what she could carry back to the boat. The figs left dark stains on the fabric of her dress, the guavas a weight in the makeshift sling she tied from a torn strip of cloth.

As she waded back to the boat, the fruits cradled against her chest, she glanced once more toward the army camp. No sign of Koffi. No sign of anyone.

The boat rocked as she climbed in, the last of the daylight gilding the lake’s surface. She arranged the fruit carefully near the bow, then sat back, her fingers sticky, her hunger momentarily dulled.

Night would come soon. Then dawn.

And with it, the answer to whether Koffi’s promise had been a lie, a truth, or something in between.

The figs tasted like betrayal. Neema chewed slowly, the sweetness of the fruit turning to ash in her mouth as her mind circled back to Koffi’s offer. Military cargo ships. She knew what that meant.

She had seen the ships before—hulking metal beasts that crawled across the lake, their bellies full of soldiers and supplies…and sometimes, women. Women who boarded with promises of transport, only to vanish into the bowels of the vessel, sold before the gangplank even lifted.

Her fingers tightened around a half-eaten guava. The juice dripped down her wrist like blood.

If she boarded one of those ships, she might never see Tanzania again. The soldiers would take everything hers. By the time the ship docked, she could be in a mining camp in Katanga, a brothel in Lubumbashi—anywhere but home.

Mwanga might as well be a ghost.

A breeze rustled the trees. Neema’s head snapped up, her body coiled to run. But it was just the wind. No rebels. No soldiers. Just her and the boat and the terrible choice looming with the dawn.

She stared at the fruit in her lap. The guavas were still firm, their skins unbroken. She could save them. Pack them carefully. Carry them onto that ship as proof she had tried.

Or she could eat them all now. Stuff herself until she was sick. Let the soldiers find her bloated and useless.

Her hands shook.

In the distance, the army camp's fires glowed like predator's eyes. Koffi was there now. Maybe asking about ships. Maybe drinking with his comrades. Maybe already forgetting her.

Neema placed the remaining fruit in the boat with deliberate care. Then she wiped her hands on her dress, leaving streaks of sticky pink.

She would wait. She would board the ship. And if they tried to take her, she would fight. Not because she believed she could win. But because Mwanga deserved a witness.

Chapter 14:

The Sharp Turn

The army camp rose from the scrubland like a scar—a sprawling mess of razor wire, sandbag walls, and sun-bleached tents. The stench hit Koffi first—a thick mix of diesel, sweat, and something sour wafting from the latrines.

He slowed as he approached the checkpoint, his boots crunching over spent shell casings embedded in the dirt. Two sentries lounged in the shade of a leaning guard post, their rifles propped against the barricade. One looked up, squinting.

"Caporal Koffi?" The man's eyebrows lifted. "We heard your camp got wiped out." Koffi grunted, wiping dust from his face with the back of his hand.

The second sentry whistled. "Just you made it?"

"Just me."

They let him through without further questions.

Inside, the camp buzzed with the same grim energy as every other outpost—soldiers gambling over dice games, a line of shirtless men

pumping water from a rusty handwell, the distant yells of a drill sergeant putting new recruits through their paces. The air vibrated with the constant thrum of generators.

Koffi headed straight for the command tent, ignoring the stares. He needed to report. To get reassigned. To slip back into the machine of war like nothing had changed. The war had taken enough from him already. He wasn't about to let it take more. The military camp was not a place of refuge.

Koffi saw it the moment he stepped past the gates—the rows of women penned like livestock near the western fence. Some sat motionless in the dirt, their faces hollow. Others clutched at the wire, their fingers bleeding where the barbs bit into flesh. Soldiers moved between them, inspecting, selecting, dragging the chosen ones toward the idling trucks.

"New shipments go west," a corporal told him, noticing his glance. The man’s teeth were stained red from kola nuts. "Commanders get first pick. The rest go to the mining camps."

Koffi said nothing.

He had seen it before, of course. Every camp operated the same way. But now, with Neema’s gaunt face still fresh in his memory, the sight curdled something in his gut.

Near the water pump, a girl no older than sixteen was being hosed down by two laughing privates. Her clothes clung to her skin as she shivered under the icy spray.

"Cleaning them up for transport," the corporal explained, following Koffi’s gaze. "Buyers prefer them presentable."

A scream cut through the camp noise. One of the women was fighting back, clawing at the soldier trying to force her into a truck. A rifle butt to the stomach silenced her. Koffi turned away.

He had his own report to file. His own reassignment to secure. The camp’s machinery would grind on with or without his conscience.

Yet as he walked toward the command tent, his steps slowed near the pen. The women’s eyes followed him—not pleading, not even angry. Just empty. Like Neema’s had been.

The corporal nudged him. "See one you like? You’ve got rank. Could claim one before they’re shipped out."

Koffi kept walking.

But that night, as he lay in the barracks listening to the snores of soldiers who didn’t dream of the things they’d done, he thought of

the lake. Of Neema waiting in the dark. Perhaps dying in the attempt to help her reach home was better than being killed and eaten by the rebels.

The trucks that would roll out at dawn, were stationary.

The camp was drunk and asleep.

Koffi moved through the shadows like a ghost, past the snoring sentry slumped against the ammo crates, past the empty bottles glittering in the moonlight. The map was folded tight in his pocket, the compass a cold weight against his thigh. He had taken only what he needed—a water pitcher, a knife, a bundle of empty grain sacks that could be torn into bandages or rope.

The women's pen was quiet now. The trucks would come at dawn to carry them west, to pits and brothels and whatever other hells awaited. Neema's face flickered in his memory—not pleading, just "there", a silent weight he couldn't shake.

He hadn't planned this. Hadn't wanted it.

But the camp had sealed it for him.

The gate creaked as he slipped out. No one stirred. The night swallowed him whole.

He walked fast, following the lake's scent on the wind. The map said Mwanga was a three-day journey east across Tanganyika—if they kept pace. Three days through a seemingly fatal stretch. Three days of impossible risk. The journey would have taken far less time if the tides had supported them and the winds hadn't pushed them back west. But that wasn't the case. Drifts often made this fifty-kilometer stretch much longer for sailors like them.

But the image wouldn't leave him—Neema, chained in that dark room. Neema, eating burned fish without complaint. Neema, walking those fifteen meters behind him like a shadow he couldn't lose.

The moon lit the path ahead. Somewhere in the dark, she was waiting. Koffi adjusted the pack on his shoulders and broke into a run.

Chapter 16:

Flames of Revenge

The rebels furious at their escape, wanted to take revenge. They moved through the jungle like smoke, their preparations precise and silent. Weapons were checked one final time—magazines clicked into place, machete straps tightened across chests. A stolen military map lay spread across damp leaves, its creases worn from fingers tracing the same routes again and again.

The leader crouched in the dirt, sketching the camp's weak points with a stick. The western trench, reeking of waste and neglect, would be their entry. The guards, drunk and lazy, would die first. The barracks would burn before the soldiers inside could wake.

Young boys filled glass bottles with gasoline, stuffing rags into the necks. Others wrapped cloth around their boots to muffle their steps. The sharp scent of palm oil mixed with gunpowder as last-minute blades were honed.

A whisper passed through the group: remember the escapees. Remember the woman and the soldier who fled. Their faces would be looked for in the chaos.

When the moon reached its peak, they moved. Scouts ghosted ahead to sever the communication wires, their knives slicing through the last thread to the outside world. The main force followed, slipping through the stench-filled trench like shadows rising from the earth. Gasoline splashed against wooden walls. Matches flared. The attack would leave no survivors, no witnesses. Only fire, and the lake's cold reflection of the flames.

The night erupted behind Koffi. He was barely ten minutes from the camp when the first explosion lit up the horizon—a bloom of orange and black that sent birds shrieking from the trees. Gunfire followed, a relentless staccato that needed no orders behind it. Koffi turned, his hand going to the rifle he hadn’t brought.

The camp was a nightmare of flame and shadow. Rebels swarmed through the gates, their machetes glinting in the firelight. Drunken soldiers stumbled from tents only to be cut down mid-scream. The women’s pen was torn open, figures dragged out by their hair.

He knew these rebels. The same ones who had chained Neema. The same ones who had burned his old camp. And now they were here.

Koffi’s muscles tensed, his body urging him to run back, to fight—but for what? The camp was lost. The soldiers, drunk and unprepared, were already dead men. The women...

The women would survive. They always did. War knew how to use them. A second explosion rocked the ground, closer this time. The armory going up. Koffi turned away. Neema was waiting. The rebels would take the camp. They would take the women. They would celebrate until dawn.

And by then, he and Neema would be gone. The lake stretched before him, black and endless. Somewhere in the dark, a boat waited. Koffi ran.

Neema stood at the water's edge, her bare feet sinking into the cold mud as the distant flames painted her face in flickering shadows. The entire horizon pulsed with an angry glow—barracks collapsing, ammunition stores detonating in sporadic bursts of light. Even from this distance, she could taste the acrid smoke on her tongue. Her hands hung limp at her sides.

Koffi had walked into that inferno hours ago. The rebels' attack had been too swift, too brutal. No one could have survived that onslaught. She knew the way these men fought - how they left nothing but bones and burning memories in their wake.

A log shifted in the fire across the lake, sending up a spiral of embers that mirrored the hollow collapse in her chest. That camp had been her last tether to anything resembling salvation. However reluctant Koffi had been, he'd still been movement, direction, a pair of eyes that recognized her existence in this world. Now even that was gone.

The night air chilled the tears tracking down her cheeks before they could fall. She didn't wipe them away. Let the lake take them. Let the fire burn them. Let this entire cursed country swallow her whole. Somewhere in the darkness, an owl cried. The sound was swallowed by the hungry roar of distant flames.

Neema turned from the burning horizon. There was nothing left to watch. No hope to kindle. Only the long walk south, her shadow stretching black and lonely across the sand. The rebels could have the night. She would take whatever came after. The weight of Koffi's presumed death settled over Neema like a burial shroud.

At first, it was the silence that hollowed her out. The absence of footsteps behind which she had measured her own survival yesterday. No gruff voice ordering her to keep up. No rifle strap creaking under the weight of indifference. Just the endless lapping of lake water against the shore, each wave erasing more of his existence.

She found herself pausing at turns in the path, her body still attuned to maintaining that exact fifteen-meter distance out of habit. When she caught herself waiting for a figure that would never appear, something brittle snapped inside her ribs. Not grief—they had been no more than reluctant shadows sharing the same stretch of road—but the crushing realization that she was truly alone now.

The landscape itself seemed to mock her. The scrubland stretched emptier. The birdsong turned sharper. Even the night felt much colder without that stubborn silhouette marching ahead to give purpose to her steps.

She caught herself scanning the horizon for movement long after reason said to stop. Her ears strained for sounds that never came—the crunch of boots on gravel, the annoyed exhale when she lagged too far behind. At night, the dark pressed closer, no longer punctuated by the occasional glow of a cigarette in the distance or the metallic click of a rifle being cleaned.

Worst were the moments when she almost turned to speak—to point out a water source, to warn of thorns ahead—before remembering no one was listening. The habits of survival lingered even when the companionship hadn't been real.

Her hands remembered the weight of fish she'd cooked for two. Her feet recalled the rhythm of walking in tandem with another living being. Her skin prickled with the vulnerability of having no one to startle at noises in the brush.

Koffi had been no savior. But his presence had been a knife edge to press her against—something solid in a world gone liquid with cruelty. Now even that was gone. She would Stop bothering about covering her tracks. What did it matter now who found her?

The rebels would kill her quickly. The soldiers would kill her slowly. The jungle would take its time. Without those fifteen meters between herself and another human soul, all paths led to the same end.

But she would keep her feet moving, because stopping would mean admitting the truth—that she had been left behind by a man who never cared in the first place, and that this final abandonment hurt more than all the violence that came before.

The fire’s glow had faded to embers on the horizon when Neema first saw the figure emerge from the smoke-hazed darkness. Her body tensed, fingers curling around a stone in the sand. Another rebel? A scavenger come to pick through the remains of her hope? The shape moved unevenly, staggering as if wounded.

Then—a cough. A familiar, grating sound. Neema’s breath caught.

Koffi stumbled into the moonlight, his uniform torn and streaked with soot. A gash above his eyebrow bled sluggishly, painting half his face in dark rivulets. He swayed on his feet, his gaze scanning the shoreline until it locked onto her. For a heartbeat, neither moved. Then Neema was running.

Her bare feet pounded the damp sand, each step crushing the despair that had settled in her chest moments before. She didn’t think. Didn’t hesitate. The stone fell forgotten from her hand.

Koffi blinked at her, dazed, as if she were the ghost and not the other way around. He opened his mouth—to snap at her, to warn her away, to say something sharp and dismissive—but Neema didn’t give him the chance.

She collided with him, her hands fisting in his charred shirt. Not an embrace. Not quite. But an anchor. A confirmation that he was real, that the world hadn’t taken this one last thing from her.

Koffi stiffened, his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. He smelled of smoke and blood and sweat. Alive.

"You—" His voice was rough. "You waited."

Neema didn’t answer. Words had never been their currency. But when she finally stepped back, her fingers lingered for a second longer than necessary, as if to prove to herself he wouldn’t dissolve into the night.

Koffi exhaled sharply, wiping blood from his eye with the back of his hand. He looked at the dying glow of the camp, then east, toward Mwanga. Toward home.

"Come on," he grunted, turning toward the lake. This time, when he walked, Neema didn’t follow fifteen steps behind. She walked beside him. The night stretched ahead, vast and uncertain. But for now, in this moment, the universe had given something back. And it was enough.

The map lay spread across the damp sand, its edges fluttering in the predawn breeze. Koffi's finger traced a winding path along the shoreline, stopping at a small mark near the water's edge. "Mwanga," he said, his voice rough with exhaustion. "Three days east if all is fine."

The moment Koffi pointed to Mwanga on the map, tracing the route across the vast expanse of Lake Tanganyika, something inside Neema cracked open—a dam of suppressed hope finally giving way.

Her fingers trembled as she touched the worn paper, as if she could reach through it and feel the red earth of home beneath her nails. The Eastern shore. Tanzania. The words alone made her throat tighten.

She thought of Juma, his calloused hands mending nets by firelight. Of Aisha’s laughter ringing through the village as she chased goats. Of Mbwana’s proud grin when he balanced baskets on his head like the older boys. For the first time in months, the possibility of seeing them again thrilled her.

A sound escaped her—not quite a laugh, not quite a sob—as she pressed her palm flat against the map, covering Mwanga as if to shield it. The boat, the oars, Koffi’s quiet presence beside her—none of it felt real. Only this: the lake that had carried her into hell would now carry her home.

She turned her face toward the rising sun, toward the east, and let the wind dry her tears before they could fall. The mast creaked as the sail caught the breeze. Every ripple in the water, every call of a fish eagle overhead, seemed to whisper "closer".

Neema did not dare speak her family’s names aloud. Not yet. But as the western shore shrank behind them, she curled her toes against the boat’s worn wood and imagined Aisha’s small hands pulling her ashore, Juma’s arms wrapping around her, Mbwana’s voice shouting, "Mama’s back!"

Neema studied the faded lines, the places where the paper had worn thin from too many fingers pressing too hard. She could almost smell the smoke of homefires, hear the laughter of children chasing chickens between huts.

"Why did you come back to help me?" The question slipped out before she could stop it.

Koffi didn't answer at first. He picked up a frayed rope and began splicing the broken ends together, his fingers moving with the same deliberate care he'd used cleaning his rifle. The gash on his forehead had crusted over in the night, a dark line of dried blood like a second eyebrow.

"Because you are the only thing that makes me feel human," he said finally, not looking up.

The words hung between them, heavier than the oars they'd salvaged, more fragile than the guavas nestled in the bow. Neema turned back to the sail she was mending, pushing through the coarse fabric with more force than necessary.

They worked in silence as the sky lightened from black to gray to the pale blue of a heron's wing. Koffi lashed the new oars to the sides while Neema wrapped the fruits in broad leaves to keep them from spoiling. The boat, which had seemed so battered the night before, now sat ready in the shallows, its patched sail flapping like the wing of a wounded bird learning to fly again. The morning sun broke over the trees, gilding the lake's surface. Koffi wiped his hands on his trousers and nodded toward the horizon. "We go now."

Neema didn't ask if he was sure. She simply waded into the water and pushed the boat deeper, the cool lake swirling around her ankles as she climbed aboard.

Koffi took the oars first, his shoulders straining against the current until the wind caught their patched sail. Then the lake took them, carrying them east toward whatever waited beyond the width of the lake.

Section IV:

The Crossing

Chapter 17:

The Onset

The heat came early, heavier than usual, pressing down on them like a hand. The sun, barely risen, already burned white and merciless in the sky. The sail hung limp, useless. No wind. No mercy. Just the slick of sweat down Koffi's back as he pulled the oars, again and again, his shoulders screaming with each stroke.

Neema watched the water. It was glassy, unbroken, reflecting the sky so perfectly it was hard to tell where the lake ended and the heavens began. No ripples. No currents. Just stillness.

She dipped her fingers in, letting the coolness seep into her skin before pressing her wet hand to the back of her neck. The relief lasted only seconds before the sun stole it away.

Koffi did not complain. Did not pause. His rhythm was unbroken—left, right, left, right—the oars cutting through the water with quiet efficiency. But she saw the strain in the way his jaw tightened, the way his breath came sharper now. And the compass was always there to show them the direction.

By noon, the heat had become unbearable. The wooden oars burned like molten iron in Koffi’s hands, the blistering sun sapping what little strength he had left. His arms trembled with each stroke, his breath ragged, his shirt soaked through with sweat. The western shore had shrunk to a thin, wavering line behind them, but ahead—nothing. Only endless water, shimmering like a mirage under the brutal glare.

They paused just long enough to eat—ripe figs bursting between their fingers, tart guavas sliced with Koffi’s knife. The juice stung the cracks in Neema’s lips, but it was something. A small relief.

When they returned to rowing, Neema took one of the oars without a word. Koffi didn’t protest. His exhaustion was too deep for pride.

At first, their strokes were uneven—his lagging, hers too forceful—but soon they fell into rhythm. Left, right. Left, right. The boat cut through the water with new purpose, their shared effort making the burden lighter. Still, the eastern shore refused to appear. Koffi’s vision blurred at the edges. His hands, raw and blistered, screamed with every pull. But he kept going. Neema matched him, stroke for stroke.

The lake gave no sign of mercy. No wind. No clouds. Just the two of them, the creaking boat, and the slow, stubborn push eastward.

They would make it. Or they wouldn't. But they would not stop. By evening, the western shore had vanished completely, swallowed by the vastness of the lake. They were utterly alone now, suspended between horizons, with nothing but water in every direction. Koffi's arms burned, his muscles trembling with exhaustion, his hands raw and blistered. Neema's breath came in shallow gasps, her own strength pushed to its limit.

Yet despite the fatigue, despite the unrelenting heat and the ache in their bones, there was something else—something quiet but unshakable. A purpose.

Every stroke of the oars carried them closer to Mwanga. Closer to home. Closer to the life that had been stolen from Neema. And though Koffi had no home to return to, no family waiting for him, he rowed with the same determination. Because this—this act of defiance against the cruelty they had endured—was noble in a way nothing else in this war had been.

The sun dipped lower, painting the water in fiery gold, and still they rowed. Their movements were slower now, their bodies worn, but their resolve did not waver.

Mwanga was out there. Somewhere beyond the shimmering haze of the horizon. And they would reach it. Together.

Chapter 18:

The Moonlit Night

The stars emerged one by one, sharp and bright in the darkening sky. The oppressive heat of the day gave way to a creeping chill, the air turning crisp against their sweat-damp skin. Neema exhaled, her breath a faint mist in the moonlight, and finally let the oar slip from her blistered hands. She stretched out on her back in the boat, her body aching, her muscles trembling from hours of relentless rowing.

Koffi groaned as he set his own oar aside, his shoulders stiff, his spine a column of fire. He lowered himself onto the wooden hull with a grunt, keeping a careful distance between them to make her feel safe. The night was quiet, the only sound the gentle lapping of water against the boat.

Above them, the moon—Waxing Gibbous of the 13th night—cast its silver light across the lake, turning the waves into a shimmering expanse of fractured light. The reflection danced and swayed, as if the water itself were alive, breathing beneath them.

Neema stared up at the sky, her fingers tracing the constellations she had known since childhood. The same stars that had watched

over Mwanga now watched over her, a silent promise that home was waiting. Koffi’s breathing was slow, steady.

For now, they rested. The boat drifted, cradled by the lake, as the moon painted their faces in pale light. Tomorrow, they would row again. But tonight, they let the stars carry them.

Neema's voice was soft, almost lost in the vastness of the night. "How beautiful the night is..."

Koffi grunted. "Hmm." She didn't seem to mind his silence. "I've always been very fond of the stars," she murmured, her eyes tracing the glittering patterns above. "The constellations, their designs and patterns fascinate me very much."

Koffi said nothing. He had never noticed such things. The stars had always just been there—distant, indifferent, the same whether he was lying in the barracks or crawling through the mud of some battlefield. They had never been beautiful. They had never been anything but light in the dark.

But now, listening to Neema speak—her voice quiet but certain, as if the heavens were an old story she knew by heart—he found himself looking up. Really looking. The stars did not change. But something

in the way he saw them did. For the first time in years, he wondered what else he had failed to notice.

Neema's voice wove through the night like another thread of starlight. "That bright one there—" she pointed to a pulsing white point near the horizon, "—we call it 'Mwezi's Lantern' in Mwanga. Fishermen use it to find their way home when the moon is slim."

Koffi gave a slow nod, his calloused hands resting on his chest as he followed her finger.

"And those three in a row," she continued, tracing a straight line across the sky, "like beads on a string? That's the Hunter's Belt. My grandmother said when they tilt sideways, it means the dry winds will come early." A pause. "They're sideways now."

Koffi made a low sound in his throat—not quite agreement, not quite surprise. The stars had never warned him of anything.

Neema turned her face toward the moon, its craters and plains glowing silver. "See the dark patches? We say that's the Moon Woman grinding cassava. When she turns her mortar just so—" she tilted her palm, "—the rains will be good."

A grunt from Koffi. He'd heard village tales before. But here, with the water whispering beneath them and Neema's words painting pictures in the dark, they didn't sound like superstition. They sounded like... remembering.

"That cluster there—" her voice dropped to something near reverence as she indicated a smudge of light, "—is the Spirits' Village. When someone dies, their light joins the others. My auntie is there. Maybe... maybe others too."

Koffi's jaw tightened. He didn't believe in spirit villages. But he found himself staring at that hazy patch longer than he meant to. The lake rocked them gently. Somewhere, a night heron called.

"You don't talk much," Neema observed, not unkindly.

"Hn."

"But you're listening."

Koffi exhaled through his nose. Above them, the Moon Woman kept grinding her cassava. The Hunter's Belt gleamed. And for once—just once—the night felt less like something to survive and more like... something else. Something he had no name for.

Neema's voice softened as she traced the arc of the Milky Way, its luminous river cutting through the darkness. "We call this the Great Canoe," she whispered. "Spirit fishermen sail it across the sky, casting nets of starlight..."

A faint snore interrupted her. She turned her head. Koffi lay motionless, his chest rising and falling in the steady rhythm of deep sleep. The hard lines of his face had relaxed, the moonlight smoothing away the usual tension around his eyes. He was not listening.

Neema sighed, but there was no irritation in it. Only a quiet understanding. The day's brutal rowing had drained them both. She should sleep too. Yet she remained awake, her gaze drifting back to the heavens. The stars burned on, indifferent to whether anyone worshipped them or not. The moon cast its silver path across the water, whether anyone walked it or not.

For a long time, she watched them—the Hunter, the Moon Woman, the silent fishermen in their celestial canoe—until her eyelids grew heavy. The last thing she remembered was the cool kiss of a breeze carrying the scent of distant rain, and the vague thought that perhaps the stars missed being seen when all eyes were closed. Then sleep took her too.

And the night carried on without witness—vast, beautiful, and utterly unconcerned with the small lives drifting beneath it.

Chapter 19:

The Clouds

Neema woke to the rhythmic creak of oars and the dull, muted light of a sun veiled behind thick clouds. The air was cool, almost damp with the promise of rain—a rare mercy. For a moment, she lay still, blinking up at the gray sky, her body heavy with the unfamiliar luxury of unbroken sleep.

It took her a breath to remember the last time she had woken without fear, without a boot prodding her ribs or the snap of a rebel's voice. Half a year, at least. Maybe longer.

She sat up slowly. Koffi was already rowing, his shoulders working in steady, mechanical motions, his face sheened with sweat despite the cloud cover. How long had he been at it? His jaw was set, his eyes fixed on some distant point ahead, as if he could will the eastern shore into existence through sheer stubbornness.

Neema reached for the remaining figs, their skins soft and splitting with ripeness. She ate two quickly, the sweetness sharp on her tongue, before checking the water pitcher. Only a few mouthfuls

sloshed at the bottom. She hesitated, then pushed it toward Koffi without a word.

He shook his head. “Drink,” he grunted, not pausing his strokes. She did, but only half, leaving the rest for him. The water was warm, stale, but it soothed her cracked lips.

The lake stretched around them, flat and endless under the low sky. No wind. No currents. Just the slow, grinding effort of Koffi’s arms pulling them forward, stroke after stroke.

Neema moved to take the second oar, but Koffi shot her a look. “Rest,” he said. A command, not kindness.

She almost argued. But her muscles still ached, her hands stiff where blisters had formed and burst. So she sat back, watching the clouds, the water, the man rowing as if he could outlast the horizon itself.

The air smelled of rain. Of earth. Of something almost like hope.

Neema closed her eyes and listened to the oars dip, again and again, marking time. They would run out of water soon. They would run out of food. But not yet. For now, they moved.

Koffi dragged the back of his hand across his cracked lips before reaching for the pitcher. He drank exactly three measured mouthfuls—just enough to wet his throat, not enough to quench the deep thirst. The last drops clung to the clay interior before disappearing. He set it down empty, the hollow sound final.

He seized the oars again, his blistered palms biting into the worn wood. The rhythm resumed: pull, lift, drag. Pull, lift, drag. The clouds shifted overhead, their shadows sliding across the boat like a blessing.

Neema watched the water. Not the featureless expanse ahead, but the patterns around them—the way the lake's surface wrinkled under stray breezes, the occasional ripple of a fish darting beneath. Once, a bird's shadow skimmed the waves, too fast to name.

The sun broke through suddenly, a searing white eye in the gray. Heat struck like a blade, stealing the breath from their lungs. Koffi's strokes faltered for half a heartbeat, his skin burning under the glare—

Then, as if summoned by some unseen mercy, the clouds slid back into place. The relief was instant, the air cooling like a damp cloth pressed to fevered skin.

Neema tilted her face upward. The sky gave no answers. No reason for this small kindness. But for the first time in months, she wondered if the world might not be entirely indifferent. If something—the ancestors, the wind, the god of lost things—might be holding its breath for them.

Koffi lifted the clay pitcher with both hands, feeling its lightness before the water even touched his lips. Three mouthfuls—he measured them precisely in his mouth, letting each one sit on his tongue before swallowing. Not enough to quench his thirst, just enough to keep his throat from closing up. The last drops beaded along the interior curve before disappearing into nothing. He set it down between them with exaggerated care, as if the empty vessel might shatter from the weight of its own uselessness.

He didn't look at Neema. Didn't ask. The question itself would have been absurd—they both knew exactly how much water remained (how much didn't remain) and what that meant. Some deprivations were beyond discussion. Instead, he flexed his hands, the blisters along his palms splitting open anew as he took up the oars again. The wood felt hotter than before, as if the sun had baked its way deep into the grain.

Neema watched the water. Not the distant horizon where land might appear, but the immediate surface—the way light fractured across

tiny waves, how a sudden gust carved temporary roads across the lake that disappeared as quickly as they formed. She counted the fish shadows that darted beneath them—three, maybe four—their shapes distorted by the water's lens.

The clouds parted without warning. Sunlight struck like a physical blow, bleaching the color from everything. Koffi's next stroke faltered mid-pull, his shoulders locking under the sudden assault of heat. For three terrible strokes, the boat veered slightly off course before—

The clouds returned. Not slowly, not gradually, but with decisive swiftness, as though some great eye had blinked. The temperature dropped instantly, the relief so sudden it felt like absolution.

Neema tilted her head back. The sky offered no explanation for its mercy. But the rhythm of cloud and sun, punishment and reprieve, felt intentional. Like the lake itself was testing their resolve while quietly ensuring they didn't fail.

Koffi adjusted his grip. The oars bit into the water again, each pull more determined than the last. The empty pitcher rocked gently between them with the boat's movement, its hollow interior echoing with every wave.

By afternoon, the thirst had become a living thing inside Koffi—a dry, cracking presence that filled his mouth and throat. His tongue felt swollen, sticking to the roof of his mouth as he tried to work up enough spit to swallow. The lake stretched around them, vast and glittering under the sun, its waters undrinkable. Salt and silt and whatever filth had washed down from the distant shores would only make them sick, burning their throats worse than the thirst itself.

He forced down a fig, the fruit like paste in his mouth. It stuck in his dry throat, and he had to press his fist against his chest to push it down. Neema was no better—he could see the way she moved more slowly, the way she kept licking her cracked lips.

When he reached for the oars again, his hands shook with exhaustion. But before he could lift them, Neema's fingers closed around one of the handles. She didn't speak. Didn't need to. Together, they rowed.

The eastern shore was still a dream, a place that might not even exist beyond the haze of heat and distance. But they moved toward it anyway, stroke after stroke, the boat cutting through the water with quiet determination. The lake gave them nothing. But they gave each other this—the shared burden, the silent understanding that neither would stop while the other still pulled. And so they rowed.

Chapter 20:

The Thunders

Night fell like a shroud, thick and absolute. No moon pierced the clouds. No stars pricked the darkness. The lake, once shimmering under daylight, now lay black and depthless, its surface indistinguishable from the sky. It was a void—a nothingness that stretched in every direction, swallowing even the sound of their breathing.

Koffi let the oar slip from his grip. His arms were leaden, his hands raw and stiff. He could no longer feel his shoulders, only a dull, burning ache that had settled deep into his bones. Beside him, Neema sagged forward, her own strength spent.

Slowly, they lowered themselves onto their backs, side by side, the boat rocking gently beneath them. The wood was hard and unyielding, but neither cared. The exhaustion was too great, the darkness too complete.

Above them, the sky offered no comfort. No light. No sign. Only an endless, suffocating black.

The lake whispered against the hull, a sound like distant voices. Koffi closed his eyes. Neema did the same.

They did not sleep. They simply existed—two small, fragile things adrift in a world that had forgotten them.

"How long will it take us to reach the eastern coast?" Neema's voice was barely audible over the growing rumble in the distance.

Koffi stared into the impenetrable dark. "One more day, if all remains fine."

But nothing was fine.

The clouds that had been flickering with silent lightning now split open with a deafening crack. Thunder shook the air, so close it vibrated in their chests. Then the rain came—not gentle drops, but a deluge that struck the lake like bullets, churning the water into a frothing chaos.

The world became noise and violence. Rain slashed sideways, stinging their faces. The boat pitched violently as waves rose from nowhere, black peaks collapsing over the sides. Neema grabbed the

hull, her fingers slipping on wet wood. Koffi lunged for the oars before they could slide away, his muscles screaming in protest.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the nightmare for one horrific instant—the lake heaving like a living beast, the rain so thick it blurred the line between water and sky. Then darkness swallowed everything once more.

"Hold on!" Koffi bellowed into the storm.

Neema wrapped her arms around the bench, her body tossed like driftwood with each wave. The boat groaned under the assault but held together—its old timbers flexing but not breaking, riding each swell with stubborn resilience.

They fought through the night. Not rowing—just surviving. Koffi wedged himself against the stern, using his weight to keep them from capsizing. Neema bailed water with cupped hands, her movements frantic but steady. The storm screamed around them, but the little boat endured, rising and falling with the angry lake. Both of them kept throwing the rainwater out of the boat.

By the time the rain eased to a drizzle, they were barely conscious—drenched, shivering, their hands raw from gripping the wood. But

they were alive. And the boat, battered but intact, still carried them eastward.

In the midnight, the rain eased to drizzle. The lake was calm again, as if the storm had never been. Only their soaked clothes and aching bodies bore witness to the battle they'd fought.

Koffi met Neema's eyes across the boat. No words passed between them. None were needed. They would rest. Then they would row again.

The storm left them broken.

When the last rains passed and the lake stilled to glass, Koffi and Neema collapsed where they sat—no strength left even to wring the water from their clothes. Sleep took them like a thief, stealing what little consciousness remained.

Neema woke first.

The morning light was pale and tentative, the sun was much above the horizon in the east. Some clouds were still there. She sat up slowly, every muscle protesting. Koffi lay curled near the stern, his face slack with exhaustion, one arm still draped protectively over

the remaining oar. His breathing came deep and even—the first true rest he'd allowed himself in days.

She wouldn't wake him.

The second oar lay where it had fallen during the storm. Neema tested its weight in her hands but didn't take up the rhythm alone. She couldn't move the boat by herself—not with any real progress. So she waited.

The lake stretched before her, endless and calm. She fixed her gaze on the eastern horizon, searching for some break in the flat line where water met sky. There was nothing yet. But there would be.

The boat rocked gently, cradled by the same waters that had tried to break them hours before. Neema trailed her fingers through the surface, watching the ripples spread and fade.

She would let Koffi sleep. Let him steal back whatever strength the storm had taken. When he woke, they would row again.

Until then, she kept watch—over the boat, over the water, over the man who had somehow become more than just a shadow to follow. The east waited. And so did she.

Chapter 21:

The Final Blow

Koffi stirred as the morning light grew stronger, his body stiff from sleeping on the hard wood of the boat. He blinked against the glare reflecting off the water, his vision clearing to see Neema already awake, watching him with quiet patience. Her eyes were fixed on him, waiting—not with expectation, but with that same steady presence she'd carried across the lake.

"Is there anything to eat?" he asked, his voice rough from sleep and thirst.

Neema nodded. "A few guavas left. And the figs." She reached for the small bundle tucked near the bow, carefully unwrapping the leaves to reveal the last of their fruit—softening at the edges, but still edible.

They ate in silence, the sweetness of the guava almost too much against their parched tongues. The figs were drier now, the flesh clinging to their teeth, but they chewed slowly, making it last. When they were done, Neema lifted the pitcher—filled now with rainwater she'd collected during the night—and passed it to him. Koffi drank

first, then handed it back to her, their movements practiced, efficient.

Koffi took up one oar, Neema the other. The wood was damp under their palms, the blisters from yesterday's storm still raw. But they pushed off anyway, their strokes falling into rhythm almost immediately. The boat turned east again, cutting through water that stretched uninterrupted ahead of them.

The shore was still out of sight. But it was there. Somewhere. And so they rowed.

Neema's hands froze mid-stroke, her gaze locked on the western horizon. A dark smudge had appeared where sky met water—too solid to be clouds, too restless to be land. The air felt different too, thick with a tension that prickled against her skin.

"Koffi," she said, her voice low.

He followed her stare, his grip tightening on the oar. The muscles in his jaw flexed once. Twice.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

The oars bit into the water with new urgency, their rhythm sharpened by fear. Koffi's strokes came harder, faster, his shoulders straining against the weight of the lake. Neema matched him, her arms burning as she pulled, again and again, the boat surging forward with each desperate push.

The eastern shore remained hidden, a taunting mystery beyond the shimmering haze. But the western darkness grew—spreading, deepening, swallowing the light behind them. The first gust of wind hit like a warning, hot and edged with the scent of rain.

Neema's breath came quick between her teeth. She rowed until her palms split anew, until the oar felt slick with more than just lake water. Koffi's grunts of effort filled the space between them, each one a promise, a prayer.

They would make it. They had to. The boat cut through the waves, fleeing the storm at their backs, chasing a shore they could not yet see.

The storm swallowed them whole in minutes.

One moment they were rowing—muscles burning, hearts pounding—the next, the world exploded into chaos. The wind screamed like a living thing, tearing at their clothes, their hair, their

exposed skin. Rain came sideways, sharp as knives, stinging their eyes until they could barely see. The lake, calm just breaths before, now heaved like a beast awakened, waves rising black and monstrous, taller than the boat itself.

The oars were useless now, ripped from their hands by the first brutal swell. The boat—their fragile, battered vessel—became a plaything for the water, tossed upward on raging crests only to plummet into troughs so deep they choked on spray. Neema's fingers locked around the mast, her nails digging into the wood as the world tilted violently beneath her. Koffi clung beside her, his body a solid weight against the storm's fury, but even his strength was nothing against this.

Lightning split the sky, illuminating the nightmare in flashes—water everywhere, endless and furious, the boat spinning, the mast groaning under their grip. Thunder shook the air, so close it vibrated in their bones. They couldn't speak. Couldn't hear. Could only hold on, their breaths ripped away by the wind, their bodies battered by the relentless waves.

The darkness was complete between lightning strikes. No shore. No sky. Just the lashing rain, the howling wind, and the terrible, yawning sense of being utterly, hopelessly small. And still, the storm raged on.

The storm had stolen everything—time, breath, even thought. There was only the howling dark, the mast biting into their palms, and the terrible knowledge that the next wave might be the one that swallowed them whole. Then came the crash—a sound like the earth itself splitting as the boat shattered against unseen rocks. Saltwater filled Koffi's mouth, his nose, the impact driving the air from his lungs. Somehow, he kept his grip.

When the world stopped spinning, Koffi found himself half-sprawled across jagged stones, the wreckage of the boat jutting from the water like broken ribs. His body screamed in protest as he pushed upright, his vision swimming. Neema lay a few feet away, her fingers still curled in a death-grip around a splintered piece of the mast, her chest rising in shallow, ragged breaths.

"Neema." His voice came out a croak, raw from salt and exhaustion. She didn't stir.

Koffi crawled toward her, every movement agony. The rocks tore at his knees, his palms, but he didn't stop until he could hook his hands under her arms. He dragged her backward, inch by inch, her body limp as a doll's. A whimper escaped her as her legs scraped over stone, but her eyes remained shut, her consciousness clinging somewhere between survival and surrender.

When they were clear of the water's reach, Koffi collapsed beside her, his own strength spent. The storm's remnants still hissed around them, but the eastern sky was lightening—not with dawn, but with the eerie, bruised glow that follows a tempest.

Neema stirred first. Her eyelids fluttered, then flew open as she gasped, her hands scrambling for purchase on the rocks beneath her. Disorientation gave way to dawning recognition as she took in the shoreline—the tangled vines, the familiar trees, the wreckage bobbing in the shallows. Her gaze locked onto Koffi's, her cracked lips forming a silent question. He nodded, just once.

A sound escaped her then—not quite a laugh, not quite a sob—as the truth crashed over her. They were here. Really here. The eastern shore. Home.

Tears spilled down her face, cutting through the grime and salt. Koffi didn't trust himself to speak, but when Neema reached for him, her fingers brushing his wrist, he didn't pull away. The wind carried the scent of wet earth and green things, so different from the lake's metallic tang. Somewhere beyond the tree line, a bird called—a sound they hadn't heard in months.

But for now, they lay where they were, two battered souls on the rocks, letting the sun dry their tears.

Section V:

The Return

Chapter 22:

The Eastern Shore

The afternoon sun burned overhead as Neema and Koffi picked their way along the rocky shoreline, their bodies still aching from the storm. They had no idea where exactly the waves had thrown them—only that they were somewhere on the eastern coast of the lake, far from any familiar landmarks. The jungle pressed close to the water here, thick and humming with insects, the air heavy with the scent of wet earth and rotting leaves.

Koffi paused, scanning the tree line with narrowed eyes. "We need to move south," he said at last, his voice low. Neema turned to him, waiting.

"The north..." He hesitated, then spat into the dirt. "Rebels have networks here too. Not like the Congo, but enough."

He didn't need to elaborate. They both knew the rumors—how armed groups slipped across the borders of Burundi and northern Tanzania, hiding in the dense forests along the lake. Some were remnants of old wars, others new factions hungry for control. They traded weapons, supplies, and people along these shores, their movements as fluid as the water itself.

Neema's fingers tightened — "Mwanga is south," she said quietly.

Koffi nodded. "Far south."

They both knew what that meant. Days of walking, maybe more. No food. No certainty. But the alternative—

A branch snapped somewhere in the trees. Koffi's hand went to the knife at his belt (the one he'd salvaged from the wreck), his body tense. Neema didn't move, didn't even breathe, until the sound faded into the usual chorus of birds and insects.

No words were needed. They adjusted their course, veering away from the jungle and closer to the water's edge, where the rocks gave way to narrow strips of sand. Seeing the scars on her feet, Koffi peeled mutuba bark and bound it beneath them. The lake lapped gently at their feet, a cruel mockery of the violence it had shown them just hours before. South. One step at a time.

The sun dipped lower, painting the water gold, but they didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Not until they found a place to rest, or a village, or—

Neema's breath caught.

There, just visible around the next bend in the shore: the faint outline of fishing nets strung between poles.

A sign of people. Of home. Koffi's hand brushed her elbow—a silent question. She nodded. And together, they moved forward.

The waterberry trees appeared like a miracle along their path, their branches heavy with ripe fruit glistening in the afternoon sun. Neema reached out first, her fingers brushing against the plump berries before plucking one and pressing it to her lips. The burst of sweetness was overwhelming—juice running down her chin, the tang sharp and bright on her tongue. She didn’t hesitate before grabbing another, then another, eating until her fingers were stained purple.

Koffi was more restrained at first, watching her as if waiting for her to continue the journey. But then she asked Koffi not to miss the sweetest berries, he reached for his own handful, eating with quiet intensity. They didn’t speak. There was no need. The berries were ripe, abundant, and for the first time in so long, they ate without fear—without rationing, without hesitation. Like the birds in the trees above them, they feasted until their stomachs ached with fullness.

When they could eat no more, they walked on, their steps lighter, their bodies nourished. The shoreline curved gently, the jungle thinning in places, the lake’s water shimmering under the fading light. The moon rose early, a perfect, luminous circle—the Waning Gibbous of the fifteenth night, bright enough to cast shadows.

Eventually, they found it: a broad, flat rock jutting out near the water's edge, smooth from years of wind and waves. A place to rest. A place that felt, if not safe, at least undisturbed.

Neema sat first, stretching her legs out in front of her, her feet sore and blistered but no longer trembling with exhaustion. Koffi lowered himself beside her, though not too close—still leaving space between them, as if out of habit.

The silence stretched, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The moon painted the lake silver, the water whispering against the rocks. Neema tilted her head back, gazing at the stars. She didn't ask Koffi anything about him. Didn't ask what he would do now that they were here. Some things didn't need to be said. And Koffi, as always, didn't speak.

But for once, the quiet between them wasn't empty. It was full—of the water berries they had eaten like animals, of the miles they had survived, of the shore they had somehow reached. The night deepened. The moon shone on.

And on the flat rock by the water, two people sat side by side, not needing words to understand they were no longer alone.

Chapter 23:

The Familiar Land

They did not sleep deeply—only in brief, restless stretches, their bodies still wired from survival. But when the first pale light of dawn crept across the sky, they were already moving, their muscles stiff but determined.

The land here was generous. Avocado trees towered over them, heavy with fruit so ripe the scent alone made their mouths water. Guavas littered the ground, their pink flesh splitting open in the heat. Neema plucked a handful of wild passionfruits, the sweet pulp melting on her tongue, while Koffi shook a tamarind tree, catching the sticky pods as they fell. They ate as they walked, juice running down their wrists, the hunger that had haunted Neema for months finally loosening its grip.

With every step, Neema's pulse quickened. The way the papyrus reeds whispered in the breeze—just like the ones near Mwanga's shore. The thick stands of wild fig trees, their ripe fruits appetizing and familiar. Even the birdsong—the piercing voice of a fish eagle—sent a thrill through her.

“This—” She grabbed Koffi’s arm, pointing to a cluster of feathery acacia trees. “We use these branches for ceremony brooms back home. And that—” A flash of red in the undergrowth. “Ngalawa berries! My aunt would make tea from the leaves to cure fever.”

Koffi said nothing, but he didn’t pull away. Just listened as she named the world back into being—baobabs with their swollen trunks, the thorny tendrils of wild passionfruit vines, the sacred fig trees where spirits were said to gather.

A butterfly landed on her shoulder—deep blue, its wings edged in black. Neema went very still. “These… they followed the rains to Mwanga every year.” Her voice wavered. “We’re close. I know it.”

Koffi studied the horizon, the set of his shoulders tense. But when Neema began walking again, he matched her step for step, their shadows merging on the sun-baked path.

The lake glittered to their left. The trees whispered ahead.

And for the first time since the rebels came, Neema let herself believe in tomorrow.

The road appeared suddenly through a break in the trees—narrow and packed hard by years of foot traffic and occasional vehicles. Koffi hesitated at the edge, scanning both directions before stepping onto the worn path. The earth felt different underfoot—firmer than the shoreline, more deliberate than the wandering animal trails they'd been following.

Neema recognized the way the mbuyu trees clustered near the road, their bulbous trunks providing patches of shade. She pointed to a broken wooden post half-buried in the dirt. "Traders used to mark these roads when I was young. This one must lead to a fishing village."

A distant engine growled. They moved aside as a mud-splattered motorcycle sped past, its rider barely glancing at them. The dust settled slowly in its wake.

Koffi picked up a discarded plastic water bottle, still damp with condensation. "Recent," he said, crushing it in his fist before letting it drop. The message was clear—people came this way often, but didn't stay long.

They walked in silence, the road gradually climbing away from the lake. The vegetation changed subtly—more mpili trees with their peeling bark, fewer of the thick jungle plants that dominated the

northern shores. A familiar birdcall made Neema look up—a kitesi's three-note song, the same one that announced dawn in the villages south of...

She stopped herself. Not yet.

A truck approached from behind, its engine laboring under the weight of stacked crates. They stepped off the road entirely this time, letting it pass without making eye contact. The bed was filled with men in worn clothes, their faces closed and wary as they rattled by.

The afternoon sun beat down as they reached a fork in the road. One path continued inland, the other curved back toward the lake. Without discussion, they chose the lakeside route—water meant villages, and villages meant...

Koffi wiped sweat from his brow. "We'll find someone before dark."

Neema nodded, her eyes on the horizon where the road disappeared into the heat shimmer. Somewhere ahead, there would be answers. Somewhere ahead, the world would become real again. But not yet.

The car's tires crunched to a stop beside them, kicking up red dust that hung in the air like fine mist. The window rolled down to reveal a man in a simple white shirt, his face lined with years of sun and kindness. A wooden cross hung from the rearview mirror, swaying gently.

"Do you need help?"

Koffi's hand twitched toward the knife hidden in his belt, his body coiled tight. But the man's eyes held no deception—only the quiet weariness of someone who had spent too long driving these roads.

"Mwanga?" Koffi asked, the word rough in his throat.

The missionary nodded. "Thirty kilometers ahead. I can drop you."

Neema stiffened. Every instinct screamed caution—strangers in cars had never meant anything good. But Koffi studied the man a moment longer, then gave a single sharp nod.

They climbed in, the vinyl seats hot against their backs. Neema sat rigid, her fingers digging into her knees as the car pulled away. The missionary offered them buns wrapped in wax paper and a bottle of water, his hands steady and open.

"Thank you," Koffi said, but left the offerings untouched between them.

The landscape blurred past—fields of sun-bleached grass, the occasional cluster of huts, children who paused their games to watch the car pass. Neema memorized every turn, every landmark, her heart pounding louder with each kilometer.

Too soon, the missionary slowed near an unmarked fork in the road. "Mwanga is two kilometers west," he said, gesturing toward a footpath nearly hidden by tall grass.

They stepped out into the heavy silence of afternoon. The car disappeared down the road to Kabwe, leaving only dust behind.

Neema stared down the path, her breath catching. She knew this place. The way the msisi trees formed a natural arch at the start of the trail. The flat rock near the bend where women used to rest their market baskets.

Home was just beyond those trees.

Chapter 24:

At Mwanga

The pathway had changed.

What should have been hard-packed earth, worn smooth by generations of bare feet and bicycle tires, now vanished beneath a tangle of guinea grass and thorny underbrush. Neema's ankles snagged on vines that curled across the trail like skeletal fingers, their brittle edges scratching her skin. The air was thick with the scent of overripe marula fruit rotting where it fell—no small hands to gather the bounty this season, no laughter to chase the flies away.

Koffi's boots crushed through wild sorghum stalks, their seed heads scattering like dust. The plants, usually kept short by grazing goats, now reached their waists, swaying in a breeze that carried no voices. A rusted bicycle chain lay half-buried in the dirt, its metal teeth choked by creeping morning glory.

Worst were the spiderwebs—great silver sheets stretched between acacia branches, undisturbed for months. Neema batted them away with trembling hands, the sticky strands clinging to her wrists like ghostly bracelets. The trees leaned closer, their untrimmed

branches forming a tunnel that swallowed the sunlight, as if the land itself mourned in silence.

No fresh footprints marked the dust. No recently broken twigs signaled passersby. Only faded scars in the bark, where knives had once carved directions, remained—nearly healed over by time. The wind whispered only the dry rattle of seed pods, the distant cough of a baboon, the endless rustle of grass against grass where no feet had walked in too long.

Neema's heart thudded, a rhythm out of sync with her steps. She wanted to believe her family had fled—Juma's strong hands guiding Mbwana and Aisha to safety, their laughter waiting in some distant village. But the silence pressed against her, heavy as the lake's depths, whispering a truth she wasn't ready to hear.

Koffi walked ahead, his shoulders squared, his knife glinting at his belt. He didn't speak, didn't turn, but his pace slowed as the path widened, as if sensing the weight of what lay beyond the trees.

The huts appeared suddenly, blackened skeletons against the bruised sunset, their charred ribs reaching toward the sky like hands frozen mid-prayer. Neema's feet carried her forward without thought, past the remnants of the communal firepit, now a crater of ash, to the place where her hearth had once burned. The doorway,

where Juma's fishing nets used to dry, was gone, collapsed into a pile of soot-stained thatch. The walls, once alive with Aisha's chatter and Mbwana's mischief, were reduced to crumbling outlines, their mud cracked and peeling like old skin.

She knelt in the ashes, letting the soot stain her knees. Her fingers found a broken mortar stone, its hollow center still bearing the ghost of a thousand meals pounded into existence. She traced its curve, the roughness familiar under her calloused palms, and closed her eyes. The memory came unbidden—Juma sitting by the fire, his low laugh as Mbwana balanced a basket on his head, Aisha's small hands tugging at Neema's skirt, demanding a taste of the evening stew. The scent of dagaa fish and cassava leaves lingered in her mind, sharp and cruel, as if the lake itself had preserved it just to wound her.

Her breath hitched. She pressed her palm harder against the stone, willing it to speak, to tell her they had escaped. But the stone was silent, and the village was silent, and the world was silent.

She stood, her legs unsteady, and moved toward the shore. The lake lapped at the pebbles, indifferent as ever, washing over the stones she and Juma had once arranged to keep the children from wandering too deep. The graveyard lay just beyond, a patch of earth marked by mounds of red dirt, their surfaces baked hard by the sun.

Forty-two full-sized graves. Eleven smaller ones. No crosses, no epitaphs, only the cruel anonymity of loss.

Neema's knees buckled. She sank to the ground, her hands clawing at the dirt as if she could dig through time itself. Two of the smaller graves—side by side, their outlines softened by wind—stared back at her. Mbwana's proud grin flashed in her mind, Aisha's giggle echoing like a fish eagle's cry. Juma's hand, calloused but gentle, seemed to brush her cheek, then faded. She wanted to scream their names, to demand the earth give them back, but her throat closed around the sound. Instead, she scooped a handful of soil from one of the small mounds, letting it sift through her fingers, the grains catching the last light of the sun.

How long had it been? Months, maybe since the rebels came. The graves were old, their edges blurred, but the pain was new, raw, a blade twisting in her chest. She had crossed the lake, survived the camps, endured the storms, all for this—for a home that no longer existed, for a family that might only live in her dreams.

Koffi stood at the water's edge, his back to her, his silhouette sharp against the dying light. The sun had set. He hadn't approached the graves, hadn't spoken, but his stillness was different now—not the cold detachment of the soldier, but the quiet of a man who knew grief's weight and chose to bear it alone.

Neema rose, the soil still clinging to her palms. She walked to the shore, stopping a few steps from Koffi. The lake stretched before them, its surface calm, reflecting the first stars like scattered coins. She thought of the nights they'd spent under those stars, her voice weaving stories of constellations while Koffi listened in silence. The Great Canoe, the Moon Woman, the Spirits' Village—stories she'd told to keep Mwanga alive, to keep herself alive.

"They're gone," she whispered, the words breaking the quiet. Not a question, not a plea, but a truth she needed to speak aloud.

Koffi turned his head slightly, his eyes catching hers. He didn't offer empty comforts, didn't fill the silence with words. He pointed towards the Spirits' Village in the sky, his gesture soft and empathetic.

The smudge was smiling in the sky. She looked at the graves one last time, memorizing their shapes, the way the earth cradled them. Then she turned to Koffi, her gaze steady despite the tears that blurred the stars.

"It's getting dark," she said, her voice soft but resolute.

Koffi nodded, his hand brushing her elbow—a gesture so brief it might have been accidental, but it carried the weight of their shared

miles, their shared survival. They turned south, away from the ruins, away from the lake that had given and taken so much. Neema's steps were slow at first, each one a farewell to the life she'd known. But as the path curved into the darkness, she matched Koffi's stride, their shadows merging on the sun-baked earth, beside which the moon was dancing on the surface of the ripply lake.

Mwanga, with all its scars, faded behind them. The night deepened, the stars embellished the sky, and the two figures walked side by side, as the only known entities to each other in the universe.

About the Novelist:

Nazim Hussain, (born 2000), known by his penname **Nazim ZarSinner,** is a Pakistani poet and writer. His juvenile creations include poems, ghazals and short stories. His collection of Urdu poems "**Nau Avesta**" (2025) explores the themes of historical exploitation by authorities, religions and social norms. "**Tanganyika Tides**" is his first English novel which traces the cycle of exploitation in the war-torn Great Lakes Region in Africa.